

The Greatest Demon Lord IS REBORN AS A TYPICAL NOBODY

Papal
Baptism

5
Myojin Katou
Illustration by
Sao Mizuno



VISIT...

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"I thought
I'd come
collect
thy seed."

Rosa

Queen of the Laville
Empire of Sorcery.
Seems to be after
Ard's DNA so her
future children can
have a good life.

The **Greatest**
Demon
Lord IS REBORN AS A
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Baptism



Even though it was right in front of my eyes this whole time, I never saw it for what it was until now. It was the most obvious thing in the world, but I just couldn't bring myself to believe it.

...I wouldn't doubt myself again. I would never make the same mistake.

To prove this to myself, I would put this situation to rest by discharging even more of my strength.

Ard

Used to be the almighty Demon Lord. Stumbles upon Lizer, his former subordinate, who is now the pope. Their chance meeting forces Ard to confront the source of his deep-seated resentment toward the world.

“All we
have to
do is pick
up Her
Majesty
in broad
daylight.”

“Ard
Meteor
makes
the laws
of the
universe!”

Ireena

An elven girl with a sense of justice. Believes in people and has faith in Ard.

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Myojin Katou
Illustration by **Sao Mizuno**

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The Greatest Demon Lord Is Reborn as a Typical Nobody, Vol. 5

Myojin Katou

Translation by Jessica Lange

Cover art by Sao Mizuno

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CHAPTER 57

The Ex-Demon Lord and a Nightmare

Whomp... Whomp... A horrible noise boomed in my mind.

Before me was an unfamiliar townscape.

Rows of distinct buildings lined what appeared to be the main drag, where a crowd of civilians were gathering. For whatever reason, bloodlust and hatred had settled onto their faces.

Their gazes locked onto Ireena, who was paralyzed with fear.

“Guys? Why are you...?!”

I couldn’t wrap my head around what caused this. As she trembled, cowered over in fear, the crowd pelted her with the worst names and insults imaginable.

“Shut up, you monster!”

“How could you fool us for all this time?!”

“Execute her! She deserves to die!”

Kill her. Kill her! The masses chanted hysterically, looking at Ireena with bloodshot eyes.

And then...they began to move as a collective, racing toward the girl standing there in pure terror.

“Aaah?!”

They had her surrounded in the blink of an eye. One of them dragged Ireena down.

“You little—!”

“Monster! Mutant! Beast...!”

They started to stomp on her as she lay crumpled on the ground.

“Agh, ngh...gah! S-sto...p...!”

Her beauty was ruined under the maelstrom of violence. Bone splintered. Facial features deformed. Her snow-white skin was dyed crimson with blood—
“Help...me...”

As she approached death’s door, Ireena stretched her hand out toward me. However, I couldn’t take it into mine.

I couldn’t save her.

Even though I was trying to reach over to her, my body wouldn’t budge. Even though I was trying to articulate something to stop the mob, my vocal cords weren’t cooperating.

I could only watch as my friend was murdered.

“A...rd...”

She offered the smallest of cries. It almost sounded like a soft shriek—Ireena’s death throes.

“Filthy monster! I bet she won’t be able to resurrect if we crush her face!”

One man grabbed a huge mallet and swung it down on Ireena’s head. There was a horrible sound. Already grotesquely contorted from enduring gruesome brutality, her face was pulverized.

“—*Gasp?!!*”

It felt like I had managed to break through the water seconds before drowning. I reflexively shot up, sitting upright on the bed. Hyperventilating, I tried to wipe away the sweat on my brow.

In a daze, I murmured to myself, “It was all a dream...”

Yeah. All those visions were part of a nightmare.

As certain proof of this...Ireena was stretched out next to me on the king-size bed. Like Ginny and Sylphy next to her, she looked like she was having a peaceful night’s sleep.

“ZZZ... I...can cook...too...,” she mumbled adorably.

I instantly felt a wave of relief.

“...Give me a break. That nightmare took it too far. Why would I have such a dream?”

I couldn't envision a future where something would cause that to happen to the world's most adorable girl. Most dreams were removed from reality, but this was really pushing it.

“Sigh...” Guess it's too late to go back to bed.”

I could hear the birds chirping outside the window. I got out of bed, walked over, and opened the curtains. It must have been the crack of dawn. The sun peeked out from behind the mountains.

“I hope I'll finally have a good day.”

By the time I let myself say that aloud, I had already let go of my nightmare. I let out a little yawn and stretched my limbs.

CHAPTER 58

The Ex-Demon Lord and the Duties of a Guard

Time slipped away from me. A week had already gone by since the end of the school trip and our return to the capital. This entire period was the definition of normalcy, as if pandemonium had never happened. Time passed without incident.

It had been sixteen years since I'd reincarnated. When was the last time nothing had happened for so long?

This day was no different. Things were easygoing at the Academy.

...However.

"Where is that clown?! Show yourself, Sylphyyyy!"

"Aaaaaaah?!"

Two of the usual suspects were as loud as ever.

In the classroom, we were all letting out yawns and stretching our limbs after a long day at school. Olivia had grabbed a fistful of Sylphy's red hair and was dragging the poor girl around.

"This has become a part of our classroom vibe."

"Uh-huh. It used to put me off, but it feels totally normal now."

Ginny and Ireena shrugged and stared as Sylphy was towed away.

"Daddy!"

"I worked my hardest today!"

Two girls flung themselves at me from both sides.

"Gimme a head rub! Gimme! ♪"

"Praise me! Praise me! ♪"

“Excellent work, Lumi, Lami.”

The two girls sighed happily, faces melting into smiles.

Lumi and Lami looked like adorable little girls...except they were spirits who should have perished in the ancient era. A certain incident at school had brought us in contact with them. One thing led to another, and here they were.

“Anyway, I wasn’t sure if this would work out...but it seems you’re really fitting in at the Academy.”

“Uh-huh!”

“The school trip was sooo fun!”

“I was scared about the group activities at first.”

“But Carmilla and Veronica were super-nice!”

Carmilla and Veronica, two students at the Academy, each saddled with their own backstory.

“Oh, Veronica. Are you leaving for the day?” I asked the blond girl right as she was about to leave.

“I finally settled some things with my family. I’m thinking about heading home early from now on.”

“Oh. I’m glad to hear that.”

“Hee-hee. All thanks to you. I’ll pay you back someday, Ard Meteor.” She flashed me a gentle smile before leaving the room.

The daughter of a duke had been having some trouble at home, but it seemed things were turning around.

“U-um, Ard.”

“Yes, Carmilla?”

Carmilla had a head of silver hair. Like Ireena, she was a descendent of the Evil Gods, and...half demon.

Ireena and I had rescued her when she had been held captive as part of an age-old custom at a certain village. Fast-forward to the present.

“I...um...am having some trouble with a few things in our Magical Studies class. Would you...uh...mind teaching me?”

“It’d be my pleasure. Ireena, Ginny. Do you mind if we stay behind?”

“No problem! In fact, I’ll help you!”

“It might help to go over the course material.”

“Lumi will, too!”

“So will Lami!”

We all devoted ourselves to our studies. It was a splendid snapshot in time.

They were closing the school grounds for the day. The bell pealed throughout the Academy, urging students to head home. Ireena, Ginny, and I were already making ourselves across the school grounds when we heard it. Sylphy was still being chewed out by Olivia, which explained her absence.

“Are we swimming in PE tomorrow?”

“Hee-hee. You won’t be able to take your eyes off my swimsuit, Ard. ♪”

We were making small talk as we made our way back to the dorms. Halcyon days. A moment in time like warm bathwater that made you want to soak forever.

However...

It seemed there were bigger plans out there for me that wouldn’t let me be.

As soon as I spotted a crowd in full plate armor, my sixth sense screamed danger. My gut was right.

One of them approached us and called out, “Sir Ard Meteor. Lady Ireena Litz de Olhyde. Her Majesty has summoned you both. Please come to the palace immediately.”

Well, we couldn’t exactly say no.

Even though I couldn’t shake the sinking feeling in my stomach, Ireena and I made our way to the palace...



Dycaeus. The capital of the Laville Empire of Sorcery. As the largest city in the nation, the capital lived up to its expectations as home to the queen's castle.

The immediate city center was distinctly lavish as if to underscore the queen's authority. The castle grounds were appropriately sprawling, but every inch was meticulously cared for.

The courtyard was a work of art. The queen herself had claimed her prized enclosure was created by hundreds of the best gardeners in her employ.

In an area with a particularly spectacular view of the garden, they had prepared a set of chairs around a table. If this was a normal day, they would find the queen gazing on her creation and sipping tea to recuperate from government affairs, but...

Right now, Queen Rosa hadn't fixed her eyes on the garden with the two other spectators.

They were observing a battle between two mages...my opponent and me.

"Hmm. I knew thy abilities were beyond the norm, Ard Meteor. To think thou wouldst rival a 7th Rank Septagon at the tender age of sixteen."

Seated at the table, the beautiful Queen Rosa expressed her admiration.

"Heh-heh! Obviously! No one can beat *my* Ard!" bragged one of the spectators, Ireena, sitting up proudly.

"Nghhhh...! Stop screwing up! You call yourself a top mage? You shouldn't be struggling against a brat!"

The third spectator was the elderly man who had arranged this battle. Prime Minister Valdr shouted in irritation.

Upon receiving this scolding, my opponent in front of me blocked my magic attack with a wry smile. At forty years of age, he had managed to rise to the highest rank among mages—Septagon—proving himself to be more than a meat head with little talent.

On one side of the scale, there was the *honor* of winning. On the other, there were risks involved in claiming this victory. This man had weighed those scales and made the right judgment call. He could do that much.

In other words, he had determined to lose on purpose, deeming the risk too high.

...Which was why this battle was turning out to be a fierce one.

Because I wasn't trying to come out on top, either.

"...A high-level defense spell without chanting anything at your age? I guess that's normal for the son of the Great Mages."

"You flatter me. You're the youngest Septagon in history. I can't even compare."

"Pshh. It won't be long before you best my record."

"Oh please. There's no way."

"Pshaw. There's no doubt."

"Not a chance."

"Come on now."

We were laying it on thick to each other as we exchanged violent blows...to try to set the groundwork for our own defeat.

...Man. This guy was good. He read my every move and deftly stopped me from losing.

Especially the first match. He had my approval. I had concocted the perfect scenario: tripping in the most unsuspecting way, creating a moment where I couldn't protect myself. I was this close to taking the brunt of his attack and accepting defeat...except he had cast a defense spell on *me* at unbelievable speed. He'd thwarted my plan!

When was the last time an opponent had such an accurate read on me? I'd been around long enough on this planet to know that this man was extraordinary.

Could I honestly lose against him...? I was starting to feel a little unsure of myself...

"Nwagh?!" The man was violently flung backward.

It wasn't of my accord. He had cast an attack spell on me and immediately

amped up the theatrics to make it seem like he'd been blasted away. The momentum made him roll on the ground, where he let out an anguished moan when he finally came to a stop.

"N-ngaghh...! Wh-what did you do, Ard Meteor...?!"

"...Excuse me?"

"I—I didn't even see your magic circle coming...! And yet...you've dealt so much damage...!"

"No, wait—"

"I...I can't get up...! I-it kills me to say that I've lost this battle...!"

Hold up. Hold up. Hold up. Hol' up.

I did *not* just hear you say that.

"Hmm! I knew thee had it in thee, Ard Meteor!"

"Casting magic without a circle! You're totally amazing, Ard!"

"Um. Wait. I didn't do anything."

Drenched in sweat, I scrambled to explain the situation...

"You didn't *do* anything...?! What do you mean...?! Are you saying this mysterious technique was nothing to you...?! You're... You're a genius...!"

My foe had taken my statement and twisted it out of proportion.

"Indeed, Ard Meteor, thou art more than fit for the *mission* I have in store for thee! No objections, right, Valdr?"

"Gnggh...! He's a phony! He must have used some trick up his sleeve!" Valdr's wrinkled face flushed red with rage.

I dunno what I did to incur his disdain from our first interaction, but apparently I was his archnemesis now.

However, that worked for me in that moment.

Marvelous. Thank you, Valdr. You've given me a helping hand.

I'd decided to launch off his talking point.

“I-indeed, Sir Valdr! I’m a cheater! I—”

“Yes. He’s basically cheated. We can only label his extraordinary skill that way...”

My opponent was stomping all over my hopes.

“Grr! Don’t let it get to your head, Ard Meteor!” barked the prime minister. “I refuse to admit this loss!”

Valdr then fled the premises, leaving us with parting words that sorely lacked sportsmanship. My opponent scrambled after him...but not before sending me a meaningful stare to convey his final message.

“You should learn how to lose better. We need this kind of skill.”

...A thought bubbled up from the deep abyss of my heart.

I wanted to suffer defeat.

“Valdr’s opinion matters not. As we discussed before, Ard Meteor and Ireena, thou shall act as my *bodyguards*,” Queen Rosa announced, beaming at us before taking an elegant sip of her tea.

That’s right. This last battle was to decide who would serve as her guards.

...I had a flashback of everything that had gotten us to that point.

It all started immediately after the knights had escorted us to Rosa.

“Thou hast heard of the holy nation, Megatholium, right?”

Ireena and I nodded in assent to the queen’s opening question.

Megatholium. Snuggled in the very center of the continent, the holy nation was made up of several unique features.

First, its size. It was standard for a country to encompass many cities, but Megatholium was about the size of a small town. Yet their scales of justice were seen as the unconditional rule across the continent, and other countries were eager to listen to their opinions on international affairs.

Why, you ask?

Because Megatholium housed the headquarters of the world’s biggest

religion...the United Creed.

The church had a lot of power over the modern world, where all cultures and customs were rooted in worshipping the Demon Lord. With the important people of the clergy in Megatholium, the holy nation was considered exceptional, even among exceptions.

“...Well? How is Megatholium related to your summons?”

“They shall be hosting a conference soon. There art five nations on this continent known as the Great Powers. This includes the Laville Empire of Sorcery. This is an assembly of those supreme leaders...a momentous event.”

At this point, I could piece together why we had been called here. It seemed that my clever little Ireena was on the same page.

“So you wanna ask us to guard you! Right, Rosie?!”

“Correct. If this assembly could have been carried out surreptitiously, I would not have troubled thee. Because the contents of our summit shall have a profound effect across the continent, I fear there was no choice but to announce this conference.”

“...What kind of contents?”

“A peace treaty among the Five Powers. Naturally, this includes a nonaggression pact, but we want to discuss the sharing of all confidential matters and technological developments... The intention of the treaty is to unify the continent into one nation—with Megatholium at its center.”

“Interesting. That’s bold.”

As she just stated, the Five Powers ruled the continent, and it included the Laville Empire of Sorcery. Their fight to control the continent was age-old, and there was still no clear winner.

If there was any reason for them to become one—

“I’ve heard there has been increased activity lately with the demons,” I observed. “I didn’t realize we’re now at the point where the Great Powers have no choice but to join forces.”

“Great strife has not yet befallen our nation, because we’re in possession of

many heroes, including thyselfes... However, that isn't the case in other nations. Our spies have reported that an entire city was wiped out when the demons conducted a large ceremony in a certain nation."

"...I see. Now is certainly not the time to be fighting among ourselves."

"Correct. I imagine the demons may eventually resurrect the Evil Gods in one of our nations. We must make haste. As part of this plan, the pope himself proposed the peace treaty."

The pope was the king of Megatholium and the highest member of the clergy who reigned over the United Creed. In the modern era, the pope spoke for the people, making it hard to defy him.

However, the Five Powers were on the same page for this situation, which explained why they were able to reach a tentative decision about this manner.

"We can no longer afford to fight with one another. Hence, we have decided to join hands. We believe the people will be receptive to this treaty and join us in our collective fight against the demons."

"Strengthening a coalition between the civilians across borders...not just the countries... I see. It would be impossible to hold the assembly in secret. However, this might trigger the demons to ramp up their terroristic activity. Which means you'll need to be protected...and have chosen us as your guards."

"There is no one I can trust more than thee."

Ireena was clearly thrilled to receive her praise, but...I was the exact opposite.

To be honest, I didn't want to be some bodyguard. It would just bring unwanted attention.

I mean, think about it. If I took on this job, I would involuntarily exceed expectations, and I would become a household name throughout the nation—no, the entire continent. Obviously, that meant it would cement the working theory of the sister figure in my life—Olivia—that I'm the Demon Lord. I could imagine her flashing me a brilliant smile.

If there was anything I had to prevent, it was that.

I tried to come up with an excuse—*any* excuse—to turn down the job. But

before I had the chance...

"I am terribly sorry, Your Majesty. I, Valdr, am opposed to Ard Meteor accompanying you." The prime minister piped up from his place beside Rosa.

"What? Why?"

"His attendance at this meeting would be inappropriate."

"Inappropriate?"

"Undoubtedly. Ard Meteor lacks the necessary qualifications, which the baron's daughter, Lady Ireena, *does* possess... If you know what I mean."

For a split second, our faces paled from nerves.

...Valdr's phrasing just indicated that he was aware of Ireena's true identity.

Ireena was more than a cute elven girl. Her father, Weiss, and she were descendants of the Evil Gods, and...the real royal family of Laville.

Rosa basically served as a puppet ruler, so to speak. The legitimate ruler of this nation was Weiss, who was known as the Heroic Baron. This made his daughter the crown princess.

If the public knew royalty had blood ties to the Evil Gods, the nation would be in danger of destruction. For generations, Laville had a peculiar system in place: placing puppet rulers at the forefront, controlled behind the scenes by the real royal family.

Now that he mentioned it, it could be argued that Ireena was perfectly qualified to join the assembly. She was a real princess, after all.

"Ard Meteor is just a commoner. The leaders of each nation will be in attendance...with guards of esteemed lineage. If Your Highness is the only one with a commoner in tow...it will be a disgrace."

Bingo. Good work, Valdr. You're absolutely right.

It seemed like a good time for me to jump in.

"Sir Valdr is right. The leaders of the other nations will look down upon Your Majesty if a villager serves as your bodyguard. I fear I must decline—"

"Hmmm. Very well, Ard Meteor. Henceforth, you are a duke."

““What?!”” Valdr and I both yelled in unison.

“Um, no! Uh-uh! No way! What are you saying?!” I asked.

“A commoner instantly joining the ranks of a duke?! Don’t you find that reckless?!”

“Hmm? But that resolves the matter, doesn’t it? If lineage is the obstacle, we ought to change it. Therefore, Ard Meteor, I bestow a dukedom upon thine family.”

““No, no, no, no, no, no, no!””

Valdr and I were in sync once again.

“Nice one, Rosie! You’re a genius!” Ireena crooned, apparently touched by the act. I thought the queen was a raging idiot.

...At the end of our discussion, which left me with a horrible migraine...

“I, Valdr, shall prepare an ideal guard who boasts the perfect lineage! The commoner shall engage in battle with this guard, and the winner will serve Her Majesty! Regardless of the result, Ard Meteor will remain a commoner! Is that okay?!”

And that’s the story.

...Fast-forward to the present.

“Let us be off! To the holy nation of Megatholium!”

“Now that Ard and I are here, protecting you will be easy-peasy!”

You can see how it ended up.

“With you both by my side, I shall fear nothing! It will be as if we are on vacation!”

“I bet we’ll be able to kick back and relax!”

Crossing my arms as I stared at the two of them, I let out a tired sigh.

Now officially on guard duty, I headed toward the holy nation with the queen and her entourage.

...Why did it come to this?

CHAPTER 59

The Ex-Demon Lord and the Holy Nation

As soon as this decision was made for us, Ireena and I returned to the school dorm to pack up our things. When we started to leave the building, Ginny and Sylphy had looked at us with expectant faces that begged to take them with us, but...

Unfortunately, that was not in the cards this time.

It was better to perform this mission in small numbers. If you only think about it in a broad sense, having more guards might seem like it would provide tighter security, but that just didn't take everything into account. It would be easier for the enemy to locate a larger group. A crowd surrounding a single person would practically scream there was someone important in the middle.

Ginny and Sylphy were smart enough to understand that.

"I pray for your safe travels, though I'm confident Ard won't need it."

"You better bring back some souvenirs!"

After saying good-bye, Ireena and I made our way to one of the carriage loading zones spread out across the capital. From there, we met up with Queen Rosa and Prime Minister Valdr in commoner clothing and boarded the custom carriage that had been prepared for us.

"Custom," but not outwardly lavish. In fact, the exact opposite. They didn't want this to turn into a parade for the queen, which was why the exterior appeared to be a standard model used by common folk. The inside, however, was outfitted with state-of-the-art technology, making the vehicle a cut above the rest. The carriage materials were imbued with magic, boasting an unbelievable durability incongruent with the aesthetics.

"Hey, Rosie. How long will it take us to get there?"

“As we shall be passing through a host of cities, I would say...one week.”

“I knew we’re gonna be on the road for a while.”

Ireena began rummaging through her bag in the cramped carriage space.

“To pass the time, let’s play a card game!”

“Oh, lovely. I cannot recall the last time I enjoyed such diversions.”

Rosa’s interest was piqued, but Valdr next to her...

“...Should we not take this a bit more seriously? There is no telling when we may be attacked,” he admonished, letting out a sigh, but Rosa and Ireena didn’t even seem to be listening.

“Whether one frets or not, it will not change anything.”

“Besides, we’ve got nothing to worry about! Right, Ard?”

Ireena was convinced there was nothing to fear with me there.

I nodded in agreement. “Yes. Please leave everything to me.”

“...Hmph! Be careful not to slip up!” Prime Minister Valdr warned with a hideously sour look.

Including the cantankerous prime minister, we amused ourselves with card games. It was an uneventful moment in time, though Valdr and I did not lower our guard during the entire game. We were poised to respond to any problem at any given moment, which meant we exchanged few words.

Rosa and Ireena, on the other hand, were chatting without a break, which must have been because they felt so safe. The topics were silly—nothing noteworthy—so I found myself tuning them out, until— “By the way, Ireena, how does thine school life fare?”

“School is so fun! Like, it’s a blast, even if there are some bad eggs in the mix! Ard keeps me on my toes, and I’ve made tons of friends!”

“Is that so? You seem to be doing quite well.”

Why did I choose to fixate on this conversation?

Rosa’s words and expressions were perfectly inoffensive...but felt contrived.

Not that I was picking up any malice. I didn't know what to make of it...

What is she thinking? I thought, trying to figure her out.

"Lady Ireena... Erm, I suppose Miss Ireena would be more appropriate," Valdr began. His voice was heavy. "I see you are at the top of the world right now. However, you mustn't forget that you were born with a troubled fate. Even if you've let someone into your inner circle...you must never reveal your true self. Otherwise..."

The prime minister cleared his throat. Valdr's face grew even grimmer—and his tone grave.

"Otherwise...you will lose everything you've gained. Because people fear what they do not know."

Ireena's expression clouded over, and she was silent.

"...But no matter what happens, we would never abandon you, Ireena," I argued, as if disputing in her stead.

Valdr looked at me without saying a single word. I imagine he saw right through my hesitation.

Because Ard Meteor...didn't trust anyone in the deep recesses of his heart.

If it was ever revealed to the public that Ireena...and I...were far from the norm...I knew Valdr's prediction would come to pass.

...I hated that about myself.

People fear what they do not know.

I would turn those words over in my mind until our journey's end.



The carriage trip took about one week. On the way, as we threaded through cities, we avoided running into any major obstacles.

As he handled the horses, the coachman's voice reached the carriage. "We have arrived."

Ireena and Rosa instantly threw open the side windows.

It was around noon. Sunlight streamed into the cabin, and I was blinded from

the brightness for a moment.

“Oh! How long it has been since I’ve laid eyes on this scenery!” Rosa exclaimed.

“It’s so picturesque! A real work of art!”

Our carriage had apparently just passed through the gate to Megatholium. Ireena and Rosa were starting to fidget in excitement. The church bell pealed as if welcoming the two girls to its town.

“Y-you’re being indiscreet! The enemy might notice your presence! Close the window!”

“Thou art far too faint of heart. Even if we are noticed, it is of no consequence.”

“Rosie’s right! After all, we’ve got Ard! We should be bold!”

Valdr held his head in his hands as Rosa and Ireena gazed out the window to take in the sights.

This man was an anxious one, too. Feeling sorry for him, I looked past the girls to observe the town.

A country made up of a single city. I could see Ireena was right: Megatholium’s townscape was a work of art. The rows of buildings seemed almost historic... The symbol of the United Creed was carved into each edifice, as expected of a holy nation.

The coachman called out again as we took in this foreign scene.

“We will be arriving at the loading zone shortly. Do take care not to be swept away by the sea of people.”

I imagine he wanted to tell us that we shouldn’t drop our guard because an assassin might be hiding among the civilians.

Soon after he informed us, our carriage arrived at the destination. Valdr and I got out first to inspect the area. After confirming there was no one who seemed shady or exuded killer vibes, I offered my hand to the girls in the carriage.

“Ireena, please give me your hand. Do watch your step.”

“Thank you.”

As soon as she alighted, I offered my hand to Rosa...

“How dare you try to touch Her Majesty, you cur!” Valdr smacked my hand away. “Come now, please take my hand.”

“Heeey. I do not wish to take hold of thine withered hand. I want Ard.”

“It is *not* withered! I, Valdr, can still be of service!”

It seemed their relationship was more indicative of a parent and child than a master and servant.

We headed out onto the main avenue. Our destination was a manor, our temporary residence. Nothing but smooth sailing on this part of the journey, too. In fact, we were at ease.

We made our way through the city to the residence, slipping through a tall gate and passing through the courtyard. Upon entering the main building, a host of servants came to welcome and lead us to our appointed rooms. We all had our own rooms, which were ridiculously spacious and lavish to the point of excess.

After confirming our sleeping quarters, Valdr looked at each of us as we stood in the hallway.

“The meeting is in six days. Until then, we’ll remain in the manor on standby. Going outside is strictly forbidden. If you need anything, have a servant prepare it for you... All right, Your Majesty?”

“Hmph. Why dost thou only warn me?”

“...Because you are the most unlikely to listen.”

“How rude! I am an adult of model prudence! In important times, I would not dare to defy a senior vassal’s counsel!”

...About thirty minutes later...

“Ard Meteor! Let us explore the sights of Megatholium!”

I had thrown myself down on the bed in my room, trying to recover from the trip, when the door swung open, and Rosa called out to me.

...For crying out loud.

I sighed once, sat up, and looked over at the door, where I found Rosa...and...

“C’mon! Hurry! Let’s get outta here before the party pooper catches us!”

...Ireena’s eyes were sparkling like a child who loved pranks.

“I believe it is best to heed Master Valdr’s instruction...but well, I suppose I can’t talk you out of it.”

I wanted to go sightseeing with them. Giving a weary sigh, I went along, trying to slip through the entrance, but— “I knew you are not one to listen, Your Majesty.”

Valdr was waiting for us there, trying to make himself seem bigger. He glared, attempting to tell us that he wouldn’t bend to our will.

“If you wish to pass, it will have to be over my dead—”

“Take this! Queenly puuuunch!”

“G-blergh?!”

Rosa’s body blow struck the old prime minister right in the solar plexus. Valdr’s unshakable decision to stop us was pulverized by a single attack.

“Hmph! ’Tis ten billion years too early for thee to stand up to me! Jerk wad!” Rosa stuck out her tongue.

“Grrrrragh...!” Valdr doubled over and clutched his stomach.

Rosa ushered Ireena beyond the gates.

“Um. As their bodyguard, I will take responsibility for their well-being. I hope this alleviates some of your worries.”

“Aaaaargh...!”

The punch must have been really effective, because he gave no response. I bet this man would find no rest until the day he died.

That made two of us. I followed after the girls.

As we stepped out into the city, we meandered through the country without any destination in mind. Of course, I was constantly taking note of our

surroundings. I repeatedly told them to keep their faces hidden beneath their hoods.

“Your Majesty. Your hood is slipping. Your face is visible.”

“Who cares? That is of little concern.”

“No. We must not allow the enemy to become aware of your presence.”

“*Sigh.* Yes, very well. Goodness, thou art stronger than any other yet still a bundle of nerves.”

The queen pouted but obeyed my instructions. Though she looked mature, she was a small child on the inside.

...Speaking of children.

Ireena had been running around like a toddler.

“I’ll never get bored of taking in this city! My mommy was right!”

“...Ireena, has your mother visited this land before?”

It was Rosa who answered my question.

“Indeed. Megatholium once held an international conference. I was still queen at the time, but I traveled with mine father. One of our guards was Ireena’s mother...Lady Claudia.”

“I see... So Ireena’s mother was named Claudia.”

“Hmm? Haven’t I told you?”

“Ah yeah...”

I had always considered talk of Ireena’s mother to be a sensitive subject, which was why I’d never brought it up before.

“Lady Claudia, huh? Her name has an austere ring to it.”

“Only a ring? Lady Claudia was a hundred times stricter than Valdr and a hundred times scarier. Neither Ireena’s appearance nor personality bear any resemblance to her.”

“I guess I used to be a little scared of my mommy, too.”

“A little? When Lady Claudia was here with us, thou were far more

rambunctious. Back then, all I remember is seeing thou burst into tears from spankings.”

“Th-that’s not true!”

“Oh? What else do you remember?”

“Huh?”

“Dost thou have any other memories besides spankings?”

“I—I...don’t, but...”

Rosa cackled as she watched Ireena mumble to herself.

“Heh-heh-heh. I told you... Dear me, I never imagined I would get on so well with one such as yourself. This world does work in mysterious ways. To think my closest companion would be the very type of person I dislike.”

Rosa had a far-off look in her eye.

A thought occurred to me. *Out of everyone in this world, Rosa has stayed by Ireena the longest.*

...Childish rivalry welled up inside me.

Hmph.

Even if Rosa had been with her the longest, I was Ireena’s first friend. I was obviously the winner if you tallied up the points.

I was Ireena’s best friend. And I wasn’t about to relinquish that title to anyone.

“...Hmm? What ails you, Ard? Something on my face?”

“Nothing.”

“Heh-heh. I see. Thou art entranced by my beauty. Well, I suppose that is only natural.” Rosa looked smug, thrusting out her voluminous chest.

Ireena’s smile slipped away.

Agh, how was I going to talk my way out of this one? My mind turned as I searched for the right words— “Hmm? Here alone, miss?”

“Did you lose your mommy and daddy?”

There was a crowd of people against the wall of a nearby building... I spotted a young girl surrounded by a group of shady orcs.

“Um, well, ah...”

“I know. Why don’t we help you look for ’em?”

“C’mon. Let’s go.”

Their words seemed generous enough...but malice seeped out of their tone.

“Hmm. I guess there’s still crime in the holy nation.”

I bet they were trying to attempt a kidnapping. Apparently, I wasn’t the only one to pick up on this.

“We’ve gotta help her!”

“Heh-heh. I haven’t let loose in so long.”

Ireena shot daggers at them. Rosa cracked her knuckles. They looked like they were ready to jump them at any moment. I stopped them with my hand.

“Wait. We must not let Her Majesty’s presence be known. Allow me to settle this.”

I approached the orcs and went to call out to them—

“Hold it!”

Before I could make my move, someone else butted in.

...The sonorous voice reverberated through my stomach.

I’d heard it before.

...No, it couldn’t be.

But if it was...this was the most inconceivable of coincidences.

I was thinking of the events of the school trip. It couldn’t be...

I nervously turned toward the newcomer.

Sure enough, standing there was...an elderly man in a black top hat, donning a dark suit. He was tall and slim with eyes like a hawk. With well-kept white hair and a grand beard, this man was...

...my former subordinate and greatest fighter.

A Heavenly King, Lizer Bellphoenix...

CHAPTER 60

The Ex-Demon Lord and the Perverted Degenerate

This man was an enigma.

He was shrewd.

He was versed in both the literary and military arts.

And most importantly—

He was a cradle robber.

...Our top soldier in the military. A Heavenly King. The pinnacle of perversion.

A man of many hats. Lizer Bellphoenix now stood before us. His black top hat concealed half his face...but there was no mistaking him.

“You there. Pestering a young girl in my presence? Some nerve.”

He had managed to take complete control of the situation with a few words. Lizer’s aura could make your hair stand on end. No one in this generation could endure it.

“Wh-what the hell do you want, asshole...?!”

“.....! H-hold it. That guy... I mean, that *gentleman* is...!”

Even the infamously savage orcs sweated and trembled at the sight of Lizer.

“Away with you. If you want me to spare your lives.”

Lizer’s threat triggered a knee-jerk reaction in the orcs, who scrambled off at full speed.

...Verda had changed over thousands of years, after all. Maybe he was exhibiting a new side, too?

Lizer Bellphoenix of the past would have never let an opponent off the hook. If he caught anyone trying to harm a young child, especially a girl, he would

have slaughtered them without mercy—whether the perpetrator was peasant or god. That was just his personality.

For Lizer to overlook a kidnapping attempt...it was shocking, almost unbelievable.

“...Are you all right, Mary?”

“I—I was so scared, Papa!”

Lizer showed a kind smile to the girl, who sprinted into his arms.

“...Papa,” huh? I knew it. He was fundamentally the same.

Well, whatever. It wasn’t like I cared if he changed anyway.

The important task at hand was escaping before he took notice of me...

“Distinguished gentleman over yonder. Could thou be Sir Lizer?”

Rosa’s polite inquiry prevented me from fleeing the scene.

Lizer looked at us as he gently stroked the girl’s hair. “Indeed. I am Lizer Bellphoenix... Hmm.”

He appraised Ireena, then me, and finally Rosa. He stroked his beard in contemplation. “...You’re an unconventional one, Queen of the Laville Empire of Sorcery,” observed the old general, looking depleted of energy.

Rosa shrugged. “I can say the same about you. Aren’t you walking around in a conspicuous state?”

Something about Rosa sounded different...and I could pick up on her unease for some reason.

Like Verda and Olivia, Lizer was considered a Legendary Apostle, so it made sense for Rosa to speak to him with a certain degree of respect. However, I couldn’t shake the feeling that she was being *too* formal.

...My suspicions were well-founded. She explained it herself.

“I imagine there is bedlam at the cathedral. After all—*His Eminence the Pope* has gone missing.”

His Eminence the Pope?

“All is well. Watching over the welfare of believers is a part of my duties.”

...Hold it.

“Ireena? May I speak with you for a moment?” I whispered to avoid grabbing Lizer’s attention. I turned next to her. “By ‘His Eminence the Pope’...can I assume Sir Lizer is the head of the United Creed?”

“Uh-huh... Didn’t you know?”

I shook my head. I had known about Megatholium and the United Creed, but the details bored me, so I didn’t bother looking into it more than necessary.

I couldn’t believe it... *Lizer* was the pope? Lizer? The one who never had a shred of loyalty toward me? *He* was in charge of leading worship of the Demon Lord?

What was going on? Why did he think taking up this role would be appropriate?

...As my brain tried to make sense of the unbelievable truth, Lizer caught sight of me.

“Young man. Are you the rumored Ard Meteor?”

“...Yes. I am but a commoner. It is an honor to be able to gaze upon Your Eminence’s holy countenance—a blessing.”

“No need to put yourself down. Commoners and nobles are the same in my eyes. What’s important...is whether one is good in both heart and body. That is all.”

Lizer looked straight at me. The old soldier’s eyes gleamed, and I could sense him reading my entire history.

...Creepy.

Out of all my subordinates, he had to be the strangest.

I could rattle off countless anecdotes about those who had made a name for themselves in the military—from our first encounter to their greatest successes. All the Heavenly Kings seemed to have their own tale. All except Lizer.

This was especially true for Olivia. Even for Verda and Alvarto. There was no

shortage of stories to tell—when we first met, when they became my subordinates, when they were promoted to Heavenly Kings, and on and on.

However... I came up blank for Lizer. He kind of just...materialized...and slipped into our military. By the time we noticed him, he had already racked up achievements without fanfare and rose to the position of Heavenly King.

His personal history was enigmatic. I tried to dig up everything I could but came up empty. He was a nonexistent man who left no trace of himself. I *did* know he was mighty in pen and sword, and he was a pervert who liked them young. That was it.

...I hired him because we were understaffed at the time, which left us with little choice, but I would have sent him packing otherwise. He was talented, but I didn't trust him one bit. Out of all the people I'd met so far, he was by far the creepiest. That was my impression.

I obviously didn't want anything to do with him.

"...Well then, Your Eminence. I'm afraid we must take our leave. Her Majesty has bestowed an important task upon us that we must ensure is carried out," I declared somewhat forcefully.

I turned my back on Lizer, trying to drag Ireena and Rosa away.

An instant later...

"Just a moment. What sort of task?" he asked, stopping me in my tracks.

Personally, I would have loved to ignore him and just gotten out of there...but considering our positions, that was impossible.

"Sightseeing around Megatholium. As requested by Her Majesty."

"Is that so? In that case, I would guide you—gladly."

"...Come again?" I blurted.

"No one is more knowledgeable of Megatholium than I—making me an excellent escort."

In your wildest dreams. No thanks.

"Ah...but...for His Eminence to serve as our guide..." Rosa hesitated.

“Seems a little discourteous...,” Ireena noted.

Exactly. What they said.

“I agree with you both—”

“There is no need for reservation. Look at me. I am not wearing my papal robe. Right now, I am a senile old man walking about town. Besides, you are our dear guests. As such, I believe it is my responsibility to be hospitable... Now, what do you say?”

“Hmm. If you are willing to go so far...”

“I guess it’d be rude of us to refuse.”

No. Please. I’m begging you...

“Very well. In that case, let us be off.” With a small smile playing across his lips, Lizer began to lead us.

...Seriously, how could these things continue to happen?

I let out a heavy sigh, all while staring at my former subordinate from behind.



Megatholium was unique in that the country wasn’t more than a little city. Even though it was tiny, there was plenty to see. Visitors from around the world flocked into the city to enjoy the sights. Since it was impossible to get to everything in one day, we decided to check out the most famous attractions.

“The clock tower is the closest. Shall we venture there first?”

From that moment onward...the outing wasn’t particularly notable. Easy, even. We didn’t run into any trouble, even though I was on high alert, and everything kinda fell into place.

But still, I felt uneasy.

And it was all Lizer’s fault. Even I found it strange that I felt so sick around him. It was hard to describe...but it was just...wretched.

On the other hand, Rosa and Ireena ate up his witty explanations of each famous locale and seemed to be enjoying themselves.

Gooong. Gooong. The bell pealed across the town.

“Ah. It is almost sunset,” Lizer murmured as he gazed at the sky. He turned to the little girl behind him. “Mary, go on home. It’s not too far. Will you be all right by yourself?”

“Yup! See you later, Papa!” The girl skipped off after saying her good-byes.

Ireena seemed puzzled by this, cocking her head to the side. “Um, Your Eminence. Are you sure it’s safe to let her go home by herself?”

“Yes. I would have liked to accompany her...but she becomes cross when I baby her.”

“Huh. I guess parenting is no easy job, even for the pope.”

“Parenting? What do you mean?”

“Hmm? Uh, well, isn’t Mary your daughter?”

Lizer looked like he had no idea what she was talking about.

“Mary isn’t my daughter. She is my 8,243,614th *wife*.”

“...Excuse me?”

This time, Ireena was the one who thought he must be on something.

“Wait... Sorry... Wife...? *What?* She couldn’t be older than...seven? I thought you couldn’t marry anyone under fifteen...”

“In Laville. In Megatholium, marriage is permitted from the age of three, making my union with Mary a lawful one. I always thought it was strange that other nations would bar those under fifteen from marrying. I mean, fifteen? They’re practically hags!”

Treated as these so-called hags, Ireena and Rosa stared off into space. I could read their expressions: *Should this guy really be the pope?*

...No, seriously. How did he get this position? He was the worst possible choice.

“I believe we have come to the final stretch of our tour.” Lizer sounded kind of worn out, like an old man exhausted from entertaining his grandkids.

...Great. We can finally be rid of this guy.

Or so I thought.

“The last stop shall be the history museum.”

...Apparently, he was hell-bent on making me feel uneasy.

So we set off on the final leg of our tour.

Speaking of museums...we just visited one during the school trip. Talk about coincidence: Our guide had been another Heavenly King...but let's set that aside for now.

The museum in Megatholium had a different vibe to it compared to the one in the ancient capital of Kingsglave. The latter exhibited personal effects of the Demon Lord and his subordinates...so you might say it was a facility meant to introduce ancient culture to the modern public.

The one in Megatholium, on the other hand, focused on the history that unfolded after my reincarnation.

After paying the dirt-cheap admission fee at the entrance, we walked down the hallway. It was already evening, but the place was dense with visitors. Like them, we studied each display, going one by one. The exhibit was an educational timeline that began with my reincarnation and continued up to the present day.

“Hmm... I...already know all this...,” Rosa mumbled, sounding bored.

Even though she was the puppet ruler, she made an excellent queen in the public eye. That meant she had received a gifted education from her childhood. It was undeniable that her academic knowledge went deeper than students like us. Needless to say, this included history.

“Hmm. This must be mind-numbing to you, but I think...it may have something to teach the two students here with us.”

Lizer had a point. The Academy offered history, but only to a degree. I did think it was much more in-depth than the generalized curriculums in most schools...but it wasn't everything.

“Huh. So Megido the Second's military campaign wasn't triggered by the assassination of the crown prince of the Sultz Kingdom,” Ireena commented.

“Our textbooks stated it was, but there seem to be conflicting opinions,” I replied.

I had to admit this place was interesting. As we continued down the hallway, we were able to get a detailed timeline of the events that occurred from the ancient past until present day. It was exciting to learn something new.

At the same time...it taught me things I never wanted to know.

“...And what do you think, Ard Meteor?”

I knitted my eyebrows at Lizer. “What do I think?”

“About our history. Now that you have a clearer picture...what is your opinion of it?”

His eyes seemed to be testing me somehow, and I went on high alert. I struggled over my answer...but I could tell he'd see through any lies. Telling the truth was my only option.

“It proves the ugliness and stupidity of humankind. I think that summarizes our history. Call me arrogant, but I...Ard Meteor...feel a little annoyed at the human species.”

“Yes, I feel the same way.” Lizer nodded at me, peering into the display, fixing his eyes on the sorcery items used in wars past. “No discrimination. No war. No rich, no poor, no illness. Could such a world be possible?”

“...If you give it serious thought, then no, I don't believe so.”

“Indeed. This museum is proof of that. Humans are repulsive creatures that love to fight and rag on one another. That is why we can never eradicate the roots of prejudice, let alone achieve true peace. Nevertheless...those final days in the ancient past were as close to a utopia as I've ever experienced,” Lizer said, voice heavy.

Ireena timidly responded. “‘Final days’...when the Demon Lord ruled the world, right?”

“Correct. After the annihilation of the Evil Gods, the Demon Lord strove to unite humanity as one. And oh, how he succeeded. Thereafter, he ruled flawlessly...and created paradise.”

“...A paradise, huh?”

This involuntary comment sounded hoarse. Its tone was filled with *self-loathing*, but Lizer gave no reaction.

He continued. “There is no question that humanity came together during this period. All worshiped the Demon Lord as their symbol, and we achieved peace as one ideology... Everyone was happy. I’m sure it is difficult to believe for those born in this modern era, but...in those days, even the demons caused no trouble, and we lived together side by side.”

“E-even demons...?!”

“My. That is nigh unimaginable.”

...I could understand Ireena’s and Rosa’s surprise. For the people of today, the demons were detestable monsters—common enemy number one.

However, Lizer was right: Humans and demons had coexisted in those days.

...Well, it was more like they were *forced* into it.

“It was like we were living in a dream. The Demon Lord had managed to work his magic. However...as you all know, he lost his life... And this museum has chronicled the events after.”

Lizer’s eyes seemed resentful. His voice grew bolder, as if it were giving his feelings form.

“Soon after the loss of His Majesty became known, humanity unveiled its foolish nature. Our united world split in an instant, and we fell into fighting, hating, and discriminating against one another once again... I did my best to prevent it, but to no avail. The people had become a raging storm whose direction I could not alter.”

With his hands balled into fists, Lizer continued in a strained voice.

“Where did...those halcyon days of our utopia go...? Our dream society disappeared like an illusion... The world today is a living hell controlled by wretched humans...!”

Rosa had a complicated expression. She looked down. It must have felt like a personal attack.

However, Lizer made no attempt to apologize or explain himself. Without sparing her a single glance...he looked straight at me.

“Humans are inherently evil—pure filth, nothing more. In order to control them and see our utopia realized...an absolute ruler is essential.”

There was a new emotion in his eyes.

However...I purposely looked away from him.

A heavy silence fell between us. Finally, Ireena’s bright voice cut in.

“Building a utopia seems pretty tough! But it’s worth it! Isn’t that what the assembly is for?!”

Lizer’s eyes widened as if taken aback by her reaction.

“So maybe we have issues! The first step is bringing humanity together! That’s why you called the Five Powers together! Right, Your Eminence?!”

“...Indeed.”

“I knew it! You *are* a nice person, Sir Pope!”

“...Hmm.”

Lizer looked at Ireena, boring deep into her eyes.

“...I see,” he whispered to himself. “The blood is distant but there. *Their* natures are identical.”

I wasn’t exactly sure what he meant by that...but it was clear Ireena had thrown him for a loop. The serious vibe hovering over us had been dispelled.

“Ireena Litz de Olhyde. You must be the key to that paradise. Please give your best efforts by cooperating with many others, including Ard Meteor.”

“Right!” Ireena replied energetically, beaming at him like a sunray.

...Maybe I was imagining things, but...for just a second, I thought I saw a wicked gleam in Lizer’s eye as he gazed at her.

CHAPTER 61

The Ex-Demon Lord's Reflections on His Day

Even though he was the worst of degenerates, Lizer Bellphoenix had dared to air his grievances about our modern society, unable to contain his explosive emotions anymore. However, Ireena managed to clear his brooding mood. I knew Ireena was the best. She was sunshine personified.

She was the reason our time at the museum passed without incident...and after a lap around the building, we made our way back to the entrance.

"And with that, our sightseeing tour has come to an end. Was it to your satisfaction, Queen Rosa?"

Rosa nodded. "I have learned much during our time together and found the experience to be invaluable. I cannot express my gratitude enough, Your Eminence."

"Think nothing of it. It was a fine recess for me... I apologize for growing heated inside. I may have had a slip of the tongue... I would be most grateful if you erased it from your minds."

"Your Eminence has spoken nothing worthy of that. I will keep thy anguish about the state of this world close to my heart. Hereafter, I shall focus my energies to become a ruler who can fulfill my responsibilities."

"...It pleases me to hear that."

With that, we exited the building. The sun had almost entirely set, and the sky was starting to darken. The day was almost over.

"It has grown late," Lizer observed. "Our subordinates might give us a scolding for staying out too long, Queen Rosa."

"Ah, but it is of little consequence to our party. After all, we are accompanied by Ard Meteor."

Rosa had just hoisted more problems onto my plate. I cracked a cynical smile.

“Well then, I bid you goodnight,” Lizer said quietly...and then then he addressed me directly for whatever reason. “Let us meet again soon, Ard Meteor.”

In your dreams.

Lizer’s parting words made me want to clap back on reflex.



On our way back to the manor, the sky had grown completely dark. There was something different about the townscape at night, compared to the day. Powered by magic, streetlamps lit up the stalls set up on the main road. Even the pedestrians took on a different form. Children at heart, Rosa and Ireena began to beg to check out the stalls and nightlife...but I managed to get them to keep it together.

I basically dragged them back to the manor... Needless to say, we received a long scolding from Prime Minister Valdr as soon as we passed through the gate.

After eating supper and taking a bath, we retired to our own rooms—which were all next to one another, allowing us to react if something happened to the queen.

Not that an invasion would occur under my watch. Just as before, I cast a net of detection magic around the area to enjoy a little time alone in my room.

“Phew. This bed is so comfortable...”

I sunk into the pillowy mattress and filled my lungs with a deep breath.

“I’m...drained... This was a long day... And it’s all thanks to...”

Lizer Bellphoenix. That old general was the root of all this.

Who would have imagined we would reunite here? And who would have guessed he’d be the *pope*? My mind refused to process this information.

“...Well, I can guess why he took this position.”

Lizer was hoping to reconstruct the society I had built at the end of the ancient era. That’s why he took on the job. The pope had much more authority

than a king.

“To think that guy would have such intense political opinions.”

The man known as Lizer was a mystery, an enigma. I wasn't just talking about his personal history. Back then, I had dealt with him without having even the slightest clue what he was thinking. After all, he had kept opinions to a minimum, compared to my other subordinates. When he occasionally made a point, it was usually about bringing salvation to little children.

“He was reserved compared to the rest of my depraved army. I mean, I guess girl-loving perverts were a dime a dozen... Not that it makes it any better.”

Though Lizer Bellphoenix was a Heavenly King, he didn't call attention to himself. In fact, he barely interacted with others...and I had kept our conversations to a minimum. We stuck to exchanging just the facts. I couldn't recall ever touching on his feelings.

“Minus his fixation on little children, he can be an apathetic guy. At least, that's my impression...but I guess I'll have to rethink my assessment.”

Thinking back to the incident at the history museum, I let out a tired groan.

“He's dangerous.”

He was completely indifferent toward humanity. He didn't believe in the slightest that people could possess any beauty. He disregarded us as nothing but nasty and foul.

...Maybe that was why I had trouble with him.

Because...we were in agreement. Humans were disgusting little creatures.

And yet...I wanted to believe otherwise. I wanted to be like Lydia, who had loved and believed in the human species...and demonkind. I wanted to have faith in the beauty of humanity. I wanted to love people.

The only problem was...that I couldn't do that wholeheartedly, unlike Lydia. I didn't have the proof to declare we were more than just hideous beasts.

“Lydia saw beauty in all of us, even without hard evidence... That must be why we took different paths in life. She was lauded as the Champion, loved by many. Even though she was as powerful as me, only I was feared as the Demon Lord.”

...I used to think I was lonely because the masses were terrified of my power... but I knew I was making excuses for myself.

It was because I didn't have faith in people. Because I couldn't love them from the bottom of my heart. That was why I had raced down the *wrong* path... headfirst into despair.

"If I don't change that part of myself, I'll end up lonely in this life... Man, I really was born with a cursed fate."

I wanted to have faith that there was good in humanity. I wanted to think we were more than pathetic worms.

However...I have no idea how to change my mindset. I gave a weary sigh.

That's enough contemplation for today. I'm just getting down on myself. Maybe I should turn off the lights and go to bed, I thought, when I heard a few quick raps on my door.

It echoed through the room.

Oh, Ireena must want to sleep with me.

I called out, "Come in."

Standing in the doorway was...

"...Your Majesty?"

The lovely Queen Rosa.

Her golden hair was slightly damp from the bath, and her porcelain complexion was flushed pink. Her sheer white negligee was translucent...and I caught sight of her soft skin.

I started to blush when I took in the slinky dress. Rosa's lips curled into a sweet smile when she picked up on my embarrassment.

"So virginal. Great men are said to be fond of sensual pleasures and bold in the bedroom. Yet thou hast already fallen to such state from the smallest glimpse of a sexy lass."

I couldn't find the words.

Her sensual body was like some type of poison.

I averted my gaze. “Wh-what business do you have with me?”

“I thought I’d come to collect thy seed.”

“...Excuse me?” That caught me off guard. My eyes snapped in her direction.

Rosa must have drawn closer when I was looking away, because she was right in front of me.

“*Tah ♪*,” she teased, pushing me down by the shoulders onto the bed. I could immediately feel her softness across my whole body.

Rosa was on top of me.

“Wh-wh-what are you doing?!”

“I just told thee. I came to collect thy seed.”

“Wait. What? No! We’re not in that kind of relationship!”

“Who says only lovers make babies? Point me to the law that prohibits it. And I am royalty. An excellent male specimen cancels out lineage, appearance, and feelings. And...thou satisfy every condition anyway.”

Rosa licked her lips. She was like a carnivore locking onto its prey.

“P-please let me go. I’m not comfortable doing this without being in love...!”

“In that case, you should push me away with all your might. Otherwise...well... it means thou art a lewd man.”

And how could I disagree with her?

...Rosa was right. I was a fool, just like the other men.

“Well? Give it to me. ♪”

Her red lips slowly drew closer. I closed my eyes tight on instinct.

...But I never felt their softness. I timidly cracked open my eyes.

“Heh-heh...! Hee-hee-hee-hee-hee...!”

I saw her lips twitch as if desperately trying to hold something back.

“Bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! You fell for it! Bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! L-look at you! With closed eyes! Like some innocent maiden! Bweh-heh! Bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

Rosa squealed in laughter, clutching her stomach as she rolled across the bed.

...I see. I've been pranked.

"What a fine hobby... Is it fun to toy with the pure feelings of innocent boys?"

"Bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha! Don't be so mad! It was all in good fun!" She hit me in the gut as she continued to lie on the bed.

"...Sure. If you're done tricking me, can you leave? I will be going to bed soon."

"Heh-heh. Treating the queen in such a way? Thou must be a big catch. Though...your *size* leaves much to be desired. Heh-heh-heh."

"...Please do not be so immodest. You are a lady, after all."

"Hmm? Immodest? I was trying to say thou hast no sizable confidence if thou cannot handle the ladies. Hmm? What were thou envisioning, Ard? Tell me."

...She was pissing me off. She was on the same level as Verda and Alvarto. They got a big kick out of constantly laughing at my expense.

"I've had enough. Please leave. Now."

"Come on. Don't be upset. We're just getting started. Let me stay."

Rosa sighed...and her expression snapped into something new. Her scheming smirk grew gentle.

"I had fun today," she said suddenly.

"...Me too."

"There were a number of surprises. What especially caught my attention was...Ireena."

"Ireena?"

"Correct. Do you recall when His Eminence lost it at the museum?"

"...Yes."

"She said everything I should have said... But I couldn't even express anything of substance. I could barely handle looking the pope in his eyes."

Huh. I didn't think anything of it, but I guess the average person would

become hypervigilant in front of Lizer.

...But Ireena was different.

“She stood before His Eminence’s terrifying countenance and spoke her mind. Hee-hee. It feels like my dear friend has grown distant. Were you the one who took her to new heights, Ard Meteor?”

There was something pained in her eyes. I maintained my silence. I had no idea how to respond. As I remained bewildered, Rosa continued.

“During our first encounter, I thought terribly of Ireena—dimwitted, negative, temperamental, competitive, wild... I wondered how I would ever get along with her.” Lying down on the bed, Rosa gazed up at the ceiling as she reminisced. “...Pray tell, Ard Meteor. What do you think of Ireena?”

“Hmm. If I started from the beginning, it would take three days and three nights... In short...I find her to be a friend that one discovers once in a lifetime.”

“Hee-hee. I see. Thou art a fine man, indeed.”

“I’m inclined to disagree. I am very normal. Anyone who meets Ireena for even a moment will fall for her. I am simply one of them.”

“Ah. Her *looks alone* will enchant just about anyone. But...how many people can continue to love her after they know the truth?”

Her question left me wordless once again. I wished I could be optimistic and claim that everyone would love her, obviously. However...I remained silent because I couldn’t bring myself to say it.

“Well, having thee by her side is enough for Ireena,” she murmured, tightly squeezing my hand. “...Remember Valdr’s words in the carriage on our way here? *People fear what they do not know*. He is right. Even I initially saw Ireena as a monster.”

“But she is your dear friend now, isn’t she?”

“Yes. But...we are the minority. We might be the only ones who know the truth and continue to love her. In all honesty... I do not trust people. I agree with His Eminence: Humans are pathetic.”

“.....”

“If the world ever discovers her true identity, they will turn on her. Those who doted on the daughter of a great hero will look upon her with disdain...and try to eliminate her.”

Her hand squeezed tighter. Rosa looked at me, begging me with her eyes.

“Protect Ireena. You are the only one I can trust.”

Her expression was grave, and I couldn’t help but feel suspicious.

Why was she asking this of me? I was just about to ask her...

“Ard! Let’s sleep...together...?”

The door burst open, and Ireena instantly froze when she witnessed us.

Crap, I immediately thought.

I could see what she was witnessing.

The beautiful queen was lying in bed next to me, cradling my hand.

It looked...like we had just finishing doing the deed.

“Wh-wh-wh-what...? What are you dooooooing?!”

Her face flushed crimson, and her eyes narrowed at us.

I began to explain the situation to Ireena. “P-please, wait. This is a complete misunderstanding—”

“Bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha! Ireena! Thy friend is vital! Begging for more, even after our passionate entanglement!”

The stupid queen had to go and say that.

“Y-y-y-your...passionate...entanglement...?!”

“Hmm? Did you know what that means? Hee-hee-hee. Seems thou hast matured in more ways than one. But a virgin, eh? Hoping to satisfy Ard? Maybe in thy dreams.”

“Grr...! Nghh...! Even for you, Rosie...this is crossing the liiiine!”

...Chaos in every sense of the word. The servants of the manor and Valdr ended up getting involved, but the clamor still lasted throughout the night.



The next day.

The morning was so quiet that I almost forgot about the uproar from the previous night. We were eating breakfast in the manor's spacious dining hall. Given they were serving the queen and her retinue, the meal was extravagant, even for breakfast.

"Mm-mmmm. The meat in this dish is divine! I wish Sylphy could try some."

"What about Ginny?" I asked.

"The side of potatoes is enough for her."

"Hee-hee. Brutal," the queen commented.

Delicious food and pleasant conversation.

This is what I wanted. I'd always been on the lookout for these quiet moments. I wished they would continue until the end of time.

"W-w-we have a problem!"

One of the servants fretfully flung open the door, scrambling into the dining hall. In that instant, I let out a mental sigh.

...I was beginning to think I was cursed. What else could explain my propensity for trouble?

"What is with this?! You are in the presence of Her Majesty! Cease your ranting and raving, fool!"

"Thou art the most loud, Valdr. You have thoroughly spit upon mine face. When we return home, I shall immediately cut your paycheck—"

"Spiiiiit it out! Teeeeell us what happened! Report!" Valdr shrieked at the servant as Rosa's gaze made him break out in a cold sweat.

"A-a-a-a guest! H-h-h-has a-a-a-a-arrived!"

"A guest? I have no business with anyone rude enough to visit in the early hours of the morning! They must be a merchant of some manner! Send them on their way!"

"N-n-n-n-no, th-th-that is, well—" The servant was absolutely petrified.

Hollow footsteps echoed in the hallway.

The aforementioned guest waltzed into the dining hall.

“Pardon my early morning visit. I haven’t much time these days... I hope you’ll forgive my rudeness, Prime Minister Valdr.”

“Y-y-y-y-you are...!” Valdr trembled from head to toe, drenched in sweat.

Who was this visitor?

“...As I promised, we meet again.”

“...A bit too quickly, wouldn’t you say?” I asked.

Once a Heavenly King and general, now a pope, Lizer Bellphoenix.

CHAPTER 62

The Ex-Demon Lord and the Pope's Request

The pope came first. There was no close second.

After all, there were many kings, but one pope.

In a society that revered the Demon Lord, the pope was at the top of the social pyramid—the ruler of all humanity.

With the title of Heavenly King under his belt, Lizer Bellphoenix was considered an unprecedented powerhouse.

...No surprise that Lizer induced mass panic at the manor by showing up unexpected.

“Wh-wh-wh-wh-what should we do...?!”

“R-r-r-r-relax! F-first, let's...yes, let's bring out some tea!”

Valdr and the servants were sweating profusely. It was getting to the point where I was worried they would be dehydrated.

Compared to their flustered panic, Rosa and Ireena remained relatively composed. It seemed the two planned on keeping a cool head as they assessed the situation. As I squared off with Lizer, they offered nothing, simply observing.

...Normally, it was the authoritative queen who should have been running the show. However, if she had no intention of facing this, I had no choice but to reluctantly step in.

“...I am pleased to see you in good spirits today. But for Your Eminence to visit us...”

“I have a rule to make the journey myself whenever I ask a request. To show my sincerity.”

I'd had just about enough of this. What did he have in store for us? For the

first time in my new life, I hated the fact that I was a commoner with no right to refuse.

“...We shall most gladly accept any request. What can we do for you?”

“As you are all aware, there are four days left until the meeting commences. The guests have already all gathered in Megatholium, and the preparations are complete... However...”

“However?”

“It shames me to say we have not finished cleaning.”

Cleaning must have been code for some matter relating to the demons. Lizer must have done a general sweep beforehand for the meeting and announcement of the peace treaty afterward to progress without any interruptions. That meant the demons hiding in the city were accounted for... but there must have been something in the way of getting the job done. And he wanted us to deal with it.

“...I see. How many?”

“Three remain. Among them, I would like to entrust one to you. We could normally take care of the matter ourselves, but...we are rather short on hands at the moment.” Lizer looked apologetic.

Ireena must have felt sorry for him, because she broke through the silence, sounding cheery. “Leave it to us, Sir Pope! Ard and I can win against anything!”

“Yes, I am counting on you.”

Lizer smiled with relief, but...there was something shady about this situation.

His gestures and words were all fishy. I was sure something else was going on.

...Having said that, we had no choice but to dance right into the palm of his hand.

“Well then, allow me to explain the details.”

He began describing the matter. As I committed it to memory, I retreated to my thoughts.

Why do these things always happen to me?



It was decided that Ireena and I would take on Lizer's request.

We would be unable to guard Rosa while we were away from the manor, but Lizer dispatched protégé knights from the cathedral instead.

Temporarily relieved of guard duty, we took on our new mission, leaving the manor behind.

"So, Ard, what should we do?"

"We should start by gathering information. We'll walk around the sector where the incident occurred. It will be tiresome work, but...let's do our best."

"Right! As long as I'm with you, Ard, I can go nonstop for three days and three nights!"

I let myself smile at Ireena's bottomless energy.

...After that, we skipped any detours and headed straight for our destination to begin gathering intel.

The incidents were a string of serial murders that had happened within the city. The crest of the demon crime syndicate, Lars al Ghul, was carved near each of the bodies. Lizer had apparently used that as his basis for concluding that the murders were demonic crimes.

...But they never bothered with the issue again. Lizer seemed to think it wasn't a big deal and put off dealing with it...

As a result, we ended up having to investigate the situation from square one.

There was no intel—which meant no interviews with the local populace directly after the events.

"Huh? What was it like during the incident? Hmm, that was a while ago..."

"...Long enough for you to forget?"

"Yeah. Probably about a month ago."

This was our first kernel of info.

We were gathering intelligence by the site of the first murder. The area was close to the main road and saw a decent amount of traffic while the sun was up.

However, it became deserted at night. It was therefore a hot spot for multiple crimes, murders included.

“Oh yes, it was definitely the work of demons! I saw ’em with me own eyes! They were half-beast and ate a person right up!”

This was our second kernel.

If it was half-beast, there was no question it was a demon. They normally wore a convincingly human guise but could transform into a hybrid when in a state of extreme excitement or agitation.

...We steadily gathered more info but didn’t stumble upon anything revelatory.

“Hmm. Maybe we should cease our interviews and inspect the crime scene.”

We moved to where the murder took place.

It was a nook that saw significant traffic.

“...There do not seem to be any Ghosts left here.”

Ghosts were masses of thought occasionally left behind by the deceased. Murder victims were especially susceptible to this, emanating hatred for those who did them wrong for eternity. This would occasionally give detectives clues about the perpetrator, which was very handy when solving cases.

...However, nothing of the sort had been left behind at the crime scene.

“There’s no trace of magic, either. We would have had a lead to follow if there was, but I suppose they wouldn’t be so careless.”

There didn’t seem to be anything else worth inspecting here.

“The scene of the latest murder isn’t far-off, so let us head there.”

We moved on to begin a new investigation.

It was still light out, but we were in an isolated backstreet. I crossed my arms as I stood right in the middle of it, performing a sweep of the area.

“Hmm... This murder occurred only two days ago... I was slightly hoping the astral spirit might still be here, but...”

After people died, their astral spirit left its mortal coil. It would then remain in this world for three days and three nights before heading off into the afterlife. As long as their astral spirit was present, it was possible to bring back the dead with revival magic.

...However, there was no such thing to be found here.

“I was hoping we could interview the resurrected victim and close this case... How unfortunate.”

“But now we know the bad guy is a demon!”

“Yes. Aside from a few exceptions, only demons possess the ability to erase astral bodies. Therefore, it is safe to assume the offender is one.”

Ireena glared at the ground and clenched her fists. “This is unforgivable...! I don’t know what they’re planning, but to take people’s lives for the sake of their own ends...! Why do they cause us all these problems...?!”

The demons filled her with righteous indignation. I planted my hand on her shoulder.

“Let us strive to resolve this matter quickly to prevent any more victims. For now...shall we visit the general store?”

“The general store? Why?”

“To purchase a map. We may be able to decipher their motivations.”

Ireena didn’t seem to understand my intentions, but she didn’t argue. In fact, she nodded as if she had faith in me. I didn’t want to let her down...but...I couldn’t predict the future.

We headed to the store and bought a complete aerial-view map of Megatholium. I took a quill pen and began marking it up.

“What are you doing?”

“Noting the crime scenes... Hmm... It appears to have been a wasted effort.”

There were a host of reasons why demons killed people, but it was often for some type of ceremony. Whether it was to offer up blood and souls, summon a powerful entity, or curse a specific person, a ritual could accomplish many

goals.

“Ceremonies use a special circle drawn with hydro-alchemy, but for exceptionally large rituals...like ones to devastate an entire city or country, for instance, they require a circle that covers the entire target area.”

I thought that might have been what the culprit had in mind, but...it looked like I was mistaken. If that had been the case, some form of circle would have shown up on the map when I connected the crime scenes, but I didn't see anything that made sense.

“I was off the mark...but no matter. There are any number of factors that will lead us to the truth.”

“Wow, Ard! You're a world-class detective!”

I was starting to feel guilty that Ireena had so much faith in me...because I'd just lied to her. To tell the truth, it was safe to say the investigation wasn't going well at all. If things went from bad to worse...there was a chance the case would end up an unsolved mystery.

Even so, it would stress out Ireena if I told her the truth. So I was doing my best to appear strong and keep her spirits high.

“...Let's continue investigating the crime scenes for now. I'm sure we will stumble on some damning evidence.”

Nothing but wishful thinking. The truth was, I knew there wouldn't be proof.

What was I supposed to do? I was keeping it together on the outside but was a mess on the inside. I headed to the nearby crime scene with Ireena, but...

On our way there, we came across a long line of people as we entered a residential district lined with houses.

“W-wow, look at that line...! How long do you think it goes?”

“I've never seen one this long, even at the royal capital.”

Normally, I'd brush this off as an unusual sight, but...this line was sending my sixth sense into overdrive.

Something was going on here. I went over and questioned one of the people

waiting.

“Excuse me. Could you tell me what this line is for?”

“Huh? Young man, don’t tell me you’ve never heard of *the Saint*?”

“...The Saint?”

Ireena and I cocked our heads in bewilderment. Most of the people in line looked at us with expressions of disbelief.

“Ah. You must not be from around these parts.”

“Doesn’t excuse them for being so ignorant!”

“Anyone who hasn’t heard of the Saint must be from the sticks.”

...Well, considering Ireena and I were from a remote village...

“Well, *sorry* for being hillbillies! Well?! Who’s the Saint?!”

“The Saint is the Saint.”

“Uh, I think his real name is Master Bordeaux.”

“He can instantly heal any illness or injury.”

“...That is something.”

Apparently, this Saint was a town physician named Bordeaux. Among those who extolled his praises were many people with thick accents, and I got the impression that this Saint was famous abroad, too.

...But since the two of us were from the middle of nowhere, we were only just hearing of him now.

“This world is full of extraordinary people,” Ireena said.

“I agree... If he is an excellent physician, I suppose all is well, but...”

I knew it. Something definitely sent my senses tingling. I pulled Ireena down the alleyway with me.

“Wh-what’s wrong, Ard? Wh-why’re you suddenly taking us to this deserted spot?”

She had apparently misunderstood me. Her pale face flushed pink.

“I wish to be away from the public eye for a short while.”

“Huh?! U-uh, but well...I-I’m not sure I’m ready...”

Yes, there seemed to be a huge misunderstanding here. I explained more thoroughly.

“We shall use mirror magic to observe the clinic. The public would grow suspicious of us, so I thought it best that we come here.”

“A-ah, I see. *Sigh...*”

Ireena seemed disappointed, but I intentionally ignored her and swiftly cast the spell.

A crimson geometric pattern...a magic circle manifested before us. Soon enough, a large, reflective object materialized from within.

“Well then... Shall we take a closer look at this Saint’s activities?”

A medical office appeared on the mirror’s surface. The interior was nothing unusual for a small physician’s office. There was a row of several shelves packed with what looked to be bottles of medicine. In the middle of the office, two men were lounging in chairs facing each other.

One appeared to be an ill dwarf. The one assessing him was a male human. I guessed he was the Saint—Bordeaux.

He looked to be in his late thirties. He had a noticeably well-trimmed beard and fine facial features. Mature, handsome, and exuding debonair, Bordeaux smiled gently.

“So how are you feeling today?”

“I-I’ve been terribly nauseous since this morning...! A-and my stomach won’t stop churning...!”

“Hmm. Nausea and diarrhea? Any guesses as to why?”

“N-none at all...!”

“I see...Well then, let me take a quick look.” As the consultation concluded, he moved on to conducting a physical examination.

It had been your usual medical exam up until this point, but—

“It seems you are afflicted by a pesky disease. The necessary treatment won’t be short—or cheap.”

“What...?!”

“Do not fear. I shall cure what ails you in a matter of mere seconds.”

After he bragged about his abilities, Bordeaux pressed his right index finger to the man’s forehead.

Then...a magic circle covered the patient’s entire body. Seconds later, it scattered into glittering particles and fizzled into skin.

“Oh...?! Ohhhhhh...?! Have I been healed?! My nausea and abdominal pain are completely gone!” The patient widened their eyes, leaping out of the chair.

Ireena murmured with wonder as she watched on from the other side of the magic mirror. “Was...that...recovery magic?!”

“Yes. One beyond modern standards.”

In the modern world, magic had been depleted to the point that recovery spells were on the brink of extinction. In ancient times, it had been a simple enough task to bring someone back from the dead, but healing the slightest scratch proved difficult in the modern era. Despite this, Bordeaux had healed an illness in a matter of seconds.

“Does his nickname come from his exceptional use of recovery magic?”

If that was all there was to it, it wasn’t a big deal. It might seem miraculous by modern standards...but it wasn’t like it was impossible.



Though extremely rare, there were “irregulars” born into the world—called mutants. Prime examples included my current parents and Ireena’s father. They were far outside the norm, which let them accomplish the impossible with ease.

“This is the first time I’ve ever seen anyone besides Daddy do it...!”

Ireena seemed to think Bordeaux might also be one of these rare entities.

However...I thought otherwise.

“Hmm. Well, how about that?” I whispered as I watched Bordeaux heal another patient.

“This is a curious case, indeed.”



Gooong. Gooong. The sound of the bell rang through the town.

In the holy nation of Megatholium, the bell counted the hour and dictated the populace’s actions. Eighteen rings. That meant it was evening and time for us to hurry home. Guards dispatched by the cathedral went on patrol and simultaneously lit the city’s magic lampposts.

At this hour...Bordeaux stepped outside as his clinic wrapped up for the day. He was about to hang up the CLOSED sign, but...I called out to him.

“Pardon me. Might I have a moment of your time?”

Bordeaux looked at me, offering a gentle smile. “How may I help you? I’m closed for the day...but if it is an emergency, I can make a house call. It is my duty to heal as many people as possible.”

“How generous. I admire the passion you have for your work.” I made a show of nodding enthusiastically...all the while narrowing my eyes at Bordeaux. “Well, I shall get straight to the point.”

From then on, I had to speak in a voice loud enough for him to hear. After all, I didn’t want the Holy Knights on patrol to get wind of this.

I voiced my sneaking suspicions about this man standing before me.

“Mr. Bordeaux... Why is a demon like you saving people?”

CHAPTER 63

The Ex-Demon Lord and the Dark Side of Humanity, Part I

The glowing streetlights lit up Megatholium at night. However, Bordeaux was shrouded in darkness, melting into the night, as he processed my question. I couldn't read his expression.

I could take a guess, though.

His deepest secret had been dragged into the light. I imagined his face was screwed up in surprise and agitation.

"...Why don't we talk inside?"

His trembling voice told me what I needed to know. Bordeaux appeared to be terrified of me...but it might be a charade.

I wasn't the only one who picked up on this. Ireena seemed to be on the same page as she stared at me. Her eyes conveyed *What do we do?*

I responded to her silent question: "Very well. We will speak at length in your office."

I went along with his proposal.

Ireena must have guessed...he might attack us as soon as we stepped foot into the clinic. Because of his situation, there was a good chance he'd want to silence us...permanently.

Nonetheless, I decided that wouldn't be an issue. After all, I had full confidence we'd be able to handle it—no matter what he threw at us.

"...Great. Come on in."

Sounding a little relieved, Bordeaux opened the door invitingly. I stepped in, relaxing my stance, while Ireena remained uptight and vigilant.

No attack came. Bordeaux shut the door, ambled over to the other side of the

room, and pulled up three chairs for us.

“Please, sit. I can brew some tea if you like.”

“No, that’s all right. We won’t be staying long...no matter what happens.”

The lighting above illuminated the single trail of sweat trickling down Bordeaux’s face as if he had sensed the gravity of my words. He was absolutely petrified of me.

Ireena studied him with a frown. “Are you really a demon?”

“...Your face tells me that you’ve never seen one so pathetic.”

For those born in this era, demons were a symbol of fear: evil incarnate, boasting devastating battle prowess, and serving as a constant threat to society.

All that being said, the man before us didn’t seem like a demon. He didn’t look like anything but a softy, an all-around good guy. Bordeaux presented himself as such, so it came as no surprise that he wanted to know how he’d been found out.

“Why do you think I’m a demon?”

“A host of reasons, but the deciding factor was...the nature of your magic.”

“The *nature* of my magic?”

“Yes. There are subtle differences between the properties of magic used by humans and demons.”

“...I see. This isn’t the first time my identity has been exposed, but never like this.” He burrowed his face into his right hand and let out a heavy sigh. He looked like he had lost all hope...but remained strangely calm.

It was almost as if...he was used to this.

“This isn’t the first time...? What do you mean by that?” Ireena asked.

“Just as it sounds. I’ve been hiding the truth and living my entire life as a human in your world. But...humans are sensitive to the unknown. I’m always found out one way or another...and I lose my home—each and every time.”

Tears pooled in his eyes.

"I thought I could learn from my mistakes and act more like a human. But it all ends the same. I knew it. Maybe demons weren't meant to coexist with humans."

Coexist.

Ireena's eyes widened. "...Coexist? Do you really mean that?"

"You may find it hard to believe, but I'm serious. It's not like I'm part of any *organizations*... I could never approve of what they do anyway."

"So you hoped to live in harmony," she stated.

"Yes. After all...I love humanity."

I sensed no deceit. Of course, it could have been all a sham, but...

"Hey, Ard. Can't we just leave him be?"

Ireena seemed to want to believe him.

Bordeaux was taken aback by her response. "Aren't you going to try to eliminate me?"

"...No. We've suffered a lot because of the demons, but I know they aren't all bad."

"She's right. Some of our classmates have the blood of demons, but they cause no trouble and get along well with everyone."

Bordeaux's eyes grew large. It looked like he wanted to say *I don't believe it* and, at the same time, *I want to believe what they're saying*.

"Is...is that so...? I have to admit I'm jealous of those children."

"Coexistence is not out of reach for you. That is, of course, as long as you're willing to obey the laws of the human world."

It was here that I drew a breath before diving into the heart of the matter.

"Well, Mr. Bordeaux. I trust you are aware of the string of murders that have been going on within the city?"

"...I've heard about them. I would like to add that the pope's personal knights are dealing with members of a certain organization."

"I mean no disrespect, but we have been wondering if you were the criminal here. We have determined that the serial murders are assaults by demons."

I paused and stared straight into Bordeaux's eyes as I waited for an answer.

"...I didn't do it. Really. Please believe me," he begged, sweat beading on his forehead. "I want to find a place in human society. I just don't agree with the actions of the demons. I think it's pointless to discriminate and oppress other races. Our power isn't meant to terrorize...it's meant to save. That's why...I opened this clinic. To rescue people."

I imagined Bordeaux was trying to say *I could never be a murderer*.

"All right. I believe you."

"Y-you do...?!"

"Yes. Please forgive us for taking up your time. We shall take our leave. Let's return to the manor, Ireena." I rose to my feet, stalking out of the office without even a glance over my shoulder.

Bordeaux must have thought my unceremonious attitude was anticlimactic.

Ireena apparently thought so. As we marched through the streets, she spoke up timidly.

"Hey, Ard. Do you trust Mr. Bordeaux?"

"Do *you*?"

"Well... I guess...it's more like I *want* to trust him." She clasped her hands tightly against her chest.

I could understand why she felt that way. She must have seen herself in Bordeaux. Hiding one's true self to find one's place in a different world...was Ireena's way of life...and mine.

I sympathized with her so much that it broke my heart.

"There is no proof that he's worthy of our trust. We'll tail him tomorrow and take it from there."

"...Yes. Good idea." Ireena nodded, seeming a little dejected.

Was she that unhappy with my opinion of him? I'd assumed we were both on

the same page. I cocked my head to the side, trying to figure out what she was thinking...

A moment later, Ireena volunteered the answer herself. "I guess it makes me kinda hate myself."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Remember what Valdr said before we reached Megatholium? That people fear what they don't know... That everyone would turn on me if they found out the truth."

"...I remember."

"I thought that wasn't true. Well, I was trying to convince myself of that... but..." Her lips began to tremble. "I don't think that's factual. I see that now. After all...we've just proven it."

...I got it now. This explained her mood.

We all feared the unknown. Even your friendliest neighbors would stab you in the back once they found out your true self was outside the norm.

She had wished that wasn't true, but...she couldn't quell her suspicions about this strange entity named Bordeaux. He was a demon. A stranger to humanity. And that was why she had thought he might be the criminal and questioned him more than necessary.

Once she got to know his real intentions, she had chosen to trust him...and that was where the self-loathing came in.

"I thought I wouldn't judge anyone. I thought I would accept everyone, even if they seemed strange to me...but I might have been wrong. I can't seem to shake my prejudice toward the demons...which makes me just about as monstrous as them."

I wanted to say something to lift her spirits, but...that was a tall order.

I couldn't find words of comfort because I had treated Bordeaux as something "other," an exception. Somewhere deep down, I had perceived him as some sort of threat to our peace.

...And as Ireena had said, I was just like him—an outsider.

“Hey, Ard. I wonder if His Eminence was right... Maybe we’re all just foul creatures,” she uttered, sounding dismal.

I couldn’t say anything to disprove her fears.



We had dinner and took a bath once we returned to the manor before heading straight to bed.

The next morning...I woke to the sound of church bells.

After a light breakfast, I invited Ireena to my room, where we surveilled Bordeaux as we’d discussed the previous night.

Queen Rosa showed interest in this venture...but she had to review documents as part of her official duties, which meant she was forced to remain absent...but not before throwing a tearful fit.

Using magic, I called forth a mirror in front of Ireena and me. The office came into view. Bordeaux had apparently already begun his day of work.

“How can I help you today?”

He never changed his gentle expression to put his patients at ease. He went about his work with quiet sincerity and devotion. If the illness was minor, he would use traditional osteopathy rather than medicine. For more serious ailments, he would go on to heal them with his magic.

“Wh-what?! It’s gone! That *thing* at my side is gone!!”

“If there is anything else that ails you, please come see me again. I will gladly heal you from any sickness.”

He looked proud of his calling. He seemed to love healing and saving others from the very bottom of his heart.

“He’s a great doctor, huh?”

“Yes. At present, we have no reason to suspect him.”

We continued to observe Bordeaux at work and came to understand him better.

I could see now why he was called the Saint. The man was virtue personified.

He unconditionally served and healed the rich and poor without distinction.

Yet he refused to receive even a single coin from his patients, telling them that it was the thought that counted. There was nothing displeased about his expression.

My impression of Bordeaux was that he was holier than the clergy.

“How may I help you today?”

“A-ain’t nothin’ wrong with me, but...my big bro is hurt...! Well, we ain’t related, but...”

“Is it so severe that he cannot come here himself?”

“Y-yeah. I know it’s real rude of me to ask the Saint to come with me, but...”

“It’s no trouble. I shall ask everyone waiting outside for their patience... They will surely understand.”

“Really...?! Thanks, man...! Let’s go!”

Bordeaux left the office with this tough guy.

“...Hey, Ard. I’m not sure we need to observe him anymore.”

“You’re right.”

We didn’t just observe his innocence with our eyes. We had confirmed it with a magical investigation, which came up empty on this man named Bordeaux. He truly was a virtuous demon who wished to live alongside humans.

“It seems there is no doubt of his goodness.”

“...I kinda wanna keep cheering him on,” Ireena said meekly.

I nodded. There was something about our existence that was similar to Bordeaux—valuing people, surrounding ourselves with friends, enjoying days full of joy.

On the other hand, our hearts were saturated with anxiety and fear... constantly terrified of losing this sense of belonging. As fellow outsiders, we understood where he was coming from.

That was why I felt the same way as Ireena.

I prayed his secret would remain hidden—and that happiness would follow him until the end of his days.

...After we finished our little patrol on him, we hurried out into town. Now that Bordeaux's name had been cleared, we were back at square one with the serial murder investigation. Ireena and I swept the streets on the hunt for fresh clues, but...

"Is this the part where we give up?"

"Hmm. We know the perpetrator is a demon, but everything else remains a mystery. To be honest, I did not expect us to have so much difficulty."

Good grief. I sighed.

The bell pealed across town. It was noon.

Gooong, gooong. The chime seemed to go on and on.

Between its rings...I heard a gurgle.

It had come from Ireena's stomach.

"Hee-hee-hee...", she chuckled. "Wanna grab a bite to eat?"

"Yes. We can't work on an empty stomach. Look at that restaurant. Why don't we check it out?"

We passed through the crowded road to our destination. It was a small restaurant with a lot of charm. The menu was out front, and we headed inside after inspecting it.

As expected of the lunchtime rush, it was packed with customers. The place was spotless and lined with booths and counter seats...and hardly any were empty.

Luckily for us, a pair sitting at a table had just finished their meal when we walked in. Upon being shown to our seats, we rested at our table after placing our orders.

"This is a cool place!"

"Yes, especially the decor."

For a moment, we let ourselves forget about this incident, allowing ourselves

to enjoy a quiet moment.

“Yeah?! You’re expecting us to pay you, asshole?!”

A sudden outburst killed the mood in the restaurant. I turned toward the noise, feeling a little nervous.

I saw a boorish orc. Next to him was a beast person. His companion shrugged in exasperation.

“Hey. Don’t make a scene, man.”

“But, Bro! This guy wants us to pa—”

“Shut it, dumbass. Don’t you know they’ve got moles working here?”

It seemed like the beast person had more authority.

“Hey. Sorry my partner has caused a such a fuss. Here’s the bill and... something extra for your troubles.”

“Huh?! This is too much...?!”

“Don’t worry about it. In return, it’d be great if you could forget we were ever here.”

After this exchange, the two fled the restaurant.

“What was up with them?! Were they just looking to complain about the service? Ugh, get a life!” Ireena fumed.

The entire restaurant seemed to share her sentiment...but didn’t make anything more of it. Including Ireena, many of them returned to their meals, eventually forgetting about the two men.

Meanwhile...

“What’s wrong, Ard? You look concerned.”

“...Just thinking about those two customers.”

If this had been any normal situation, I would have dismissed it, but...my sixth sense was telling me otherwise.

“...Hmm. That means...” I planted my chin on my hand, lost in thought. I was forming a certain hypothesis.

“H-hey, Ard? You’re acting a little funny... Is something wrong?”

“Hmm... I can’t say for sure yet...” I crossed my arms, mumbling to myself. “I think I might know who the culprit is.”

“What?!” Ireena screeched.

Nearby customers jumped out of their seats, surprised by her sudden outburst, but this didn’t seem to bother her.

She leaned forward. “And?! Who is it?!”

“There’s no definite proof. I would like to gather concrete evidence... Ireena, how well do you know Megatholium?”

“How well? I think I have a general idea. After all, Daddy said I share an important connection with Megatholium. He told me to learn all I can about it. I’ve been keeping up on the latest info.”

“I see. In that case...do you know the ins and outs of Megatholium’s laws and political system?”

“Well, yeah. Can’t exactly skip those.”

Good job, Ireena. I knew I could count on you.

“Let me ask you a few questions. Oh, I know. First...would you say laws are stricter here than in other nations?”

“Way tougher. It feels like there’s a rule for everything. Daddy says Megatholium is a ‘constitutional government.’”

“I see. And what about their methods to exert control over the people? Would you say it has more influence than our systems in Laville?”

“Hrm... They do have a wider reach...but I think it’s overkill.”

“Overkill?”

“I don’t know how they do it, but Megatholium keeps an eye on its people. The city knows everything—from obvious facts like the birth and death of each citizen, to income and purchase history.”

“Huh.”

“I think it’s only possible because they’re so small... Even if Laville could implement the same system, I would be against it. Having someone spying on you all the time? That just feels like a free-range prison.”

“I have to agree... Going back to the topic, would it be safe to assume tight surveillance has significantly reduced criminal activity?”

“I wouldn’t say that.”

“Meaning?”

“People rebel when there’s too much pressure...which means there are a lot of murderers and criminals here. Except there’s something twisted about it...”

“In what way?”

“The victims and perpetrators are all adults. No children get caught up in criminal affairs. And...the laws favor children and are especially punitive toward adults.”

Okay. I see. I was starting to get a better picture of the legal system here.

I knew he was trying to re-create the society I had once built...except this wasn’t a complete reenactment...because everything about it prioritized Lizer’s ego.

“And of those crimes...how many cracked down on illicit drugs?”

“Um, let’s see, uh...a bunch? I think. There’s a zero-tolerance policy for selling drugs to kids. It guarantees the death penalty. Apparently, it’s only a minor crime to peddle drugs to adults. Seems like they can be found anywhere.”

Ireena looked at the ceiling as if this triggered something in her memory. “Some of the patients in Mr. Bordeaux’s office seemed drugged up.”

“Yeah... Seems like this city-state is particularly sick.”

Even though it seemed like a constitutional government that boasted an innovative political system, it was actually rooted in Lizer’s strange fixation on the happiness of children.

This made it the perfect breeding ground for the black market.

However, it required a little *ingenuity*.

I looked around the room again and quickly murmured, “This restaurant seems to be a microcosmic representation of Megatholium.”

Ireena didn’t seem to understand, looking at me with a tilted head.

That was when our food arrived.

“I would have loved to enjoy our meal, but I’m afraid that’s impossible. Let’s dig in.”

“S-sure! I don’t really get it, but I’ll pick up the pace!”

Ditching all manners and decorum, we focused on wolfing down our meals. We stuffed ourselves in seconds.

“*Phew...* That was delicious.”

We paid our bill and rushed out of the restaurant.

“*Burp...* W-well. What now? Should we check out the crime scenes?”

“That’s no longer necessary. No need to interview any more witnesses, either. We shouldn’t have even investigated the crime scene or tried to locate the culprit to start.”

“Then what should we focus on?”

“The victims. Let’s learn every detail available about them. If my hypothesis is correct, that will lead us to the truth.”

We would start by learning the names of the victims. We had been so preoccupied with the details of the case and forming a criminal profile that we hadn’t given any attention to them. We knew nothing about their character. Not knowing these facts would get us nowhere.

“Let’s head to the library. They must have tabloid articles about the incidents. If we read those, we might be able to identify them.”

I hurried down the main avenue while informing Ireena of our next destination.

“Hmm...”

On the way there, we spotted Bordeaux among the passersby.

“Oh, it’s Mr. Bordeaux. Looks like he just finished a house call—Huh? Ard? Where you going?”

“After him. I have to warn him about something.”

“What thing?”

“There is a chance Bordeaux is involved in the case.”

“What?! B-but he’s not the criminal, right...?!”

“He’s not. But if my suspicions are correct, he is the one in the most danger. I’ll go over the details later. Right now, we need to get to him as quickly as possible.”

We accelerated our pace and approached Bordeaux from behind. We were just about to call out to him...

“—gh?!”

A strained wheeze escaped his throat.

There was a housing complex before him...with an old woman slouching by one of its walls.

As soon as we spotted her...a potted plant fell from the third-floor sill when someone opened the window. It was heading straight for her head...

Bordeaux had already sensed danger and made his move. He closed the distance between himself and the old woman, shielding her with his own body. Seconds later, the pot struck him square in the back.

“Gah...!” he cried, anguished, but that wasn’t enough to leave much of a mark on his body.

Even so, the old woman would have died if it had struck a vital area. Bordeaux had prevented the worst from happening. It was worthy of praise...but no one even whistled—much less cheered for his efforts. They all gaped at him and held their breath.

Why?

...Because half of Bordeaux’s body had transformed into a beast.

In normal circumstances, demons appeared just like any other person.

However, exhibiting their true powers triggered transformations to half-beast. As he had just done.

By using his inhuman powers to save the woman, he had accidentally outed himself as a demon.

“H-hey, is that guy...?”

“N-no. No way...”

At first, one person started to see what was going on. Then a second person spotted it.

This was bad. We were seconds from mass panic spreading through the people.

“I guess there’s no way out of this...!”

To prevent the worst from happening, I cast a spell. A crowd had gathered around Bordeaux. Over their heads, a geometric pattern expanded, and seconds later, it dissolved into gleaming particles. The targets looked up at the sky and blinked.

“H-huh?”

“I feel like we saw something crazy?”

The results were instantaneous.

“Wh-what did you do, Ard?”

“Wiped their memories... It’s poor taste to tamper with people’s brains, so I rarely use it, but...I didn’t have much choice.”

The crowd was blinking up at the sky. While that was going on, Bordeaux immediately transformed back into his usual self. He didn’t seem to know what was happening, either.

“...That was a close one. Good thing we made it in time,” I murmured with a sigh of relief as Ireena and I approached Bordeaux.

He caught sight of us and seemed to piece together the situation.

“...It looks like you saved me somehow.”

“Think nothing of it... Let us head to the alleyways. I wish to discuss something that is best not heard by human ears.”

Bordeaux nodded gravely and obliged. We slipped into the narrow backstreets. I sighed after I confirmed it was unoccupied.

“I’ll be frank: Mr. Bordeaux, you’re being targeted. I urge you to hide for the time being.”

The only one shocked by the news was *Ireena*. Bordeaux himself appeared calm, and his answer was brief.

“Ah, really? I knew it.”

“What? You knew? What do you mean?” she questioned, looking between the two of us.

Ireena was totally lost, and I couldn’t blame her. I looked at her and explained in simple terms.

“Bordeaux is being used as a scapegoat.”

“A-a scapegoat?”

“Basically, he’s taking the blame for someone else.”

“Wh-who would do that...?! ”

Bordeaux answered for me. “I’d guess it has to do with the recent murders.”

“...You knew. Do you know the culprit?”

“I have no evidence, so I can’t say for certain. I do have an idea, but...it took me until now to come to terms with their scheme.”

There was something almost unnaturally composed about his expression.

...I knew that look. I’d been intimately familiar with it in my past life.

It was the face of a man who was jaded by the world. He looked just like me in the past. This had been the same expression plastered across my own face.

“...Maybe this was good timing.”

“For what?”

“To close shop.”

“...Are you just going to give up? Cast aside your sense of belonging in society?”

“Yes. That seems to be my fate. It always ends the same, even when I try my hardest. I will always be the target of fear, hate, and elimination. Such is the will of the Creator.”

“Th-that’s not true! We don’t hate you! Right, Ard?!”

“Ireena is right. No need to be hasty, Mr. Bordeaux. You do not know what life has in store.”

He didn’t say a single word. He merely stared at us with that abnormally calm expression of his.

“You’re always putting people first, Mr. Bordeaux! You’ve healed so many patients! The public adores you! They’re indebted to you! Those feelings don’t just go away! People aren’t..... People aren’t that stupid!”

She wanted to have faith in humanity. Ireena’s eyes shone with emotion.

However...Bordeaux’s heart would not be moved. The forlorn man did not show an ounce of change, as he had lost faith, *because* he was aware of it all.

“...Listen, please believe us. We want to help. As I requested before, please go hide. All right?”

“Okay.” His vacant eyes held no willpower.

...I didn’t feel the most comfortable leaving him in this state, but I had to. We still had tasks on our plate.

We would solve the murders and safeguard Bordeaux. Everything else would come later.

“...Let’s go, Ireena.”

“R-right.”

I turned on my heel to leave Bordeaux behind...

“Hey, Ard. Didn’t you say one of your classmates is a demon yesterday?”

“...Yes. What about it?”

“What’s their name?”

“...There is a girl named Carmilla.”

“I see. Carmilla, huh. She must be happy to have friends like you... Could you give her a message for me? Tell her she mustn’t forget her love of people—no matter what transpires.”

His message was cryptic. There was a deeper meaning. It was easy to read through them, but...it was too late to resolve the underlying problem...

“I will relay the message.”

“Great. Thank you.”

After this simple exchange, Ireena and I parted ways with Bordeaux... purposely ignoring the fragile voice coming from behind me.

“I’m so tired.”

CHAPTER 64

The Ex-Demon Lord and the Dark Side of Humanity, Part II

“I will solve this case by the end of the day. I promise,” I declared with a blank glare as we headed to our top destination, the library.

Just who was I talking to?

Not Ireena.

I guess...I’d say it was directed toward fate.

We hurried to the library where we identified the victims. Once we found out their names and backgrounds, we got in touch with anyone with any kind of relation to them.

We had done a general sweep for our investigation...when the sound of the bell tolled across town. As it signaled evening, I looked at Ireena.

“Shall we head to the main event?”

“You bet...!”

After exchanging a nod, we started to stroll forward, side by side, heading for...a district where the wealthy lived. Our target was the master of a stately mansion.

First, we approached the enormous gate and spoke to the guards.

“Is this the manor of Kold Raspberry, the head of Raspberry & Co.?”

“You’ve come to the right place... What business might you have with the master?”

“Please let Sir Raspberry know that personal attendants of an esteemed visitor have come to discuss business.”

I imagined they would scoff at such a statement under normal circumstances. But since the assembly of the Five Powers was days away, there was something

credible about my statement.

“...Just one moment.” The guard disappeared behind the gate and returned about ten minutes later.

“You have been granted an audience. However, you must allow us to inspect your belongings before entering.”

After checking every inch of our bodies and finding nothing, we passed through undeterred, greeted by a man whose duty seemed to be escorting visitors. We obediently followed him through the courtyard and entered the mansion.

The manor’s interior was exactly what I expected. It was almost uselessly glittery, decorated with ostentatiously expensive vases and paintings. They say you can tell a lot about a person by the inside of their home...and I could see that was particularly the case here.

“The master awaits you in this room. If we pick up the slightest hint that he has no interest in you, you will be escorted off the premises immediately,” the man warned in a detachedly professional manner before leaving.

“...Well, shall we meet him for ourselves?”

I gripped the knob and slowly opened the door.

The room was almost inappropriately big and conspicuously garish. Lounging on an expensive sofa in the center of the room was a middle-aged man...Kold Raspberry.

He had that peculiar aura of a business titan, and he looked upon us with a broad smile.

“Oh, we have guests. You’re just as young as they told me,” he said good-naturedly. “Anyway, have a seat. Can I get you something to dri—?”

“No, thank you. We can stand. We won’t be long,” I cut him off and continued without a moment’s delay. “First of all, you have my apologies. We lied to you. Our intention is not to discuss business. We came...*to condemn you.*”

Kold’s eyes widened, and his jaw went slack. “Huh? Condemn me?”

“Yes. I imagine you’re aware of the recent string of murders that have stirred

the town?”

“Of course. One of my own was done in, after all.”

“It seems that way... And that only cemented your position—all because the gifted victim no longer posed a threat to you.”

The words streamed out of my mouth.

As time passed, his expression started to ease its tension. “I see. You think I’m behind these incidents... Who are you two anyway? You lied to the guards, huh?”

“I shall only say that a certain someone has entrusted me with resolving this case.”

“A certain someone? ...Whatever. So why do you think I did it?” he asked, maintaining his relaxed smile.

I explained my working theory to him.

“I initially thought the criminal was a demon. Based on the testimonies from residents and information from the crime scene, I’d concluded it had to be one. However—”

“One thing led to another!” Ireena cut in. “And we realized it could have been done by someone other than a demon! Right, Ard?!”

I nodded to her. “It all came together when we visited a certain restaurant and learned about Megatholium’s laws and political system. That led me to my second theory—”

“This...was done by a human who was trying to *frame* a demon! This was your conclusion, right, Ard?!”

Ireena was stealing my thunder, but that just made her cuter.

“Yes. That was when I started to have my suspicions. After that, we researched the victims and their backgrounds. And in that process...we made sure to leave no stone unturned.

“...Huh.”

“Our investigations showed that while the victims were upstanding citizens on

the surface...they were actually gang members who earned a living selling drugs.”

“If anyone could profit off their deaths, it’s you! The boss of Raspberry & Co., Kold Raspberry!”

“Or perhaps we should say...Sir Drug Lord?”

In that moment, his expression changed. His smile flooded with darkness.

“You have two faces, a public one and a private one. You show that you’re a respectable businessman. But the other...reigns as a mob boss. The victims were all the top dogs of rival organizations.”

“Who would profit from their deaths?! You!” Ireena barked. “You killed anyone who got in your way and tried to place the blame on Mr. Bordeaux! You were the one who dropped that potted plant on the poor old lady! You tried every method to expose Mr. Bordeaux’s real identity and make him out to be the bad guy! Ard saw right through you!”

It was here that Ireena paused for a moment and checked his reaction.

...He apparently planned on playing dumb.

“You’ve got quite an imagination. Me? Mob boss and serial killer? Hah! How stupid! I avoid profitless ventures and risky deals on principle... Um. Ard, right? Did you just say you learned about this nation’s laws and political system?”

I nodded, and he seemed to snicker at me.

“In that case, I’m sure you understand. It is risky to form a gang and engage in ‘lucrative’ activities in this holy nation of Megatholium. The government knows everything about its citizens—from their income to even their purchase history. To try to profit off drugs here is—”

“Since you weren’t profiting from respectable business, this money really can’t be used. If you tried to spend it, you’d be arrested for possessing money of unknown origin.”

“Exactly. Everything is closely monitored here, which means gangs are high risk and no return. After all, you can’t spend any of the money you make.” Kold shrugged. “Use it once, and you’ll find yourself behind bars. A thick wad of cash,

all for nothing. That might be a different case abroad, but those schemes won't work here. When it comes to organized crime, hell is a better breeding ground than Megatholium—"

"You're sounding like a black-market amateur." I stared at Kold, who was silent for a moment.

"It's true you can't use unaccounted money in Megatholium. And it's impossible to leave the country with it," I continued to explain. "However...you could take dirty money and give it value if you wash the grime off. In other words..."

"Money washing...? What was it? Money... Oh, right! Money laundering!"

"Yes, Ireena. You have a fantastic memory."

"Tee-hee!" She puffed up her chest. She was seriously the cutest person in all creation.

Seeing her made my face relax...while Kold's stiffened.

His smile had slipped off his lips, and his eyes were looking a little sharp.

I flashed him a smile. "We saw some tough guys at a certain restaurant. That was when it hit me. I wondered if this establishment was laundering money... And the gears started turning in my mind...leading us to you."

Megatholium was Lizer's attempt to re-create society at the end of the ancient era. Back in those days, ruffians had run their own black market, wreaking havoc in our civilization. The same thing was happening now.

...When I was in control, I refused to let organized crime run amok and eventually eliminated all mobs. As the leader of this nation, however, Lizer was indifferent to their presence.

He didn't seem to care as long as no one was selling drugs to children. It was all water under the bridge as long as no one was threatening children or taking their money. The laws seemed to reflect his wicked personality.

"As long as you're careful to leave children out of it, this nation is a criminal's paradise. Wouldn't you agree, Sir Drug Lord?"

I pointed at Megatholium's greatest crime boss and made my declaration.

“These serial murders were a human crime meant to look like the work of demons. And the one who ordered his subordinates to carry out the plan...was you, Kold Raspberry.”

He was silent for some time before he finally began to chuckle. He started to clap enthusiastically.

“Yes, excellent! You got it right on the nose. Everything was under my orders.”

Kold openly admitted his crimes, but those eyes showed no sign of resignation. In fact...they burned with violent malice that said he would eliminate anyone who got in his way.

“At any rate, *that* person is a scoundrel, too. Saying I could only stand to profit from this deal and dispatching a lap dog to take care of business? Good thing I prepared for this...”

Kold stomped on the floor two times. *Boof. Boof.*

The door quietly clicked open, and droves of people surged into the room.

“They’re all mages who specialize in dirty work. You might even say that when it comes to the art of espionage, they’re as skilled as professionals. There are even some who murdered the best mages in other countries... So I imagine you understand the situation?”

“Hmph. Ireena, what do you make of all this?”

“Hee-hee! Isn’t that obvious?!” She snorted with all the confidence in the world and stared at me. My dear friend’s eyes gleamed with certain expectation. “Get ’em, Ard!”

“Understood,” I answered with a smile—and snapped my fingers.

A moment later...the mages started dropping like flies. It was as if the strings controlling them had been cut.

“.....Huh?” The smile had slipped off Kold’s face. His jaw hung slack in shock. “Wh-what is this...?! What? Why? How...?!”

“No need to be so surprised. I just snapped my fingers, amplified its volume several thousand times, and sent the attack directly into their brains.”

“...Huh?”

“Think of it as a cheap magic trick... I imagine it feels like the greatest illusion of the century to you.”

Kold still couldn't grasp the situation. My Ireena, on the other hand, thrust her chest out in triumph.

“Hee-hee! Atta boy, Ard! I have no clue what you did, but it was totally awesome! You're the best in the whole wide world! My best friend is mind-blowing!”

Ireena was a ball of cuteness as she bragged for me. Compared to her delightful nature, my battle skills were chopped liver. Ireena was the reigning world champion of everything.

“D-dammit! Who the hell are...? Ah?! C-come to think of it, I've heard the name Ard Meteor...! You're the prodigy causing trouble in Laville...! You're *the* Ard Meteor...!”

“Hee-hee-hee! That's right! He's become a household name abroad!”

It seemed like my reputation had been spreading across the continent against my will—because of all the recent screwups. I was so happy Olivia wasn't around, I could have cried tears of joy.

Shrugging in exasperation, I asked Kold: “Well, Sir Drug Lord? I have one question for you..... Who is the mastermind?”

“Th-the mastermind?”

“Yes. This is the work of a human, but...it's not like you were in control. Isn't that right?”

Kold broke out in a sweat and said nothing. I pressed him further.

“You have human capital. That's why almost anything is within your reach. As for this latest incident, there is one thing that's impossible, even for you. That is...disposing of the victims' astral bodies. That alone you cannot do.”

The forces collapsed around us were Kold's best personnel. For those of the modern day, their power was, in a word, astounding. However, none had the ability to erase these spirits.

“Are you still hiding your ace bodyguard...? I doubt it. If that were the case, you would have called them out a long time ago.”

I shot him a hard glare, and Kold’s composure seemed to dissolve before our eyes as he started to cower in fear.

“I—I don’t know what you’re talking about! I-I’m the only one involved—”

“Hmm? Have you forgotten already? You just said it yourself. *‘That person is a scoundrel.’* ...So? What person? I would love to know.”

“Th-that’s...!” Kold was sweating profusely, and his eyes darted around the room.

...Well, I could guess, but we didn’t have evidence. I considered getting the man to talk, but...

“Ngh...?! Gh-grgh-glug...?!” Without any warning, Kold began to clutch his chest in agony.

“A-Ard...?! Is this...?!”

“I knew it. It seems they’ve implemented countermeasures.”

If possible, I would have healed him and gotten the information by any means possible, but...it didn’t look like that was going to happen.

Whoever was controlling Kold had crafted the perfect silencer. If certain conditions were met, it erased the target’s astral spirit...by using something like *Geass*—an unbreakable oath—or another magical vow. The average user could analyze the technique and nullify it while the magic was in effect...but the mastermind seemed to have strength in spades. The spell was complex, and even I would have trouble dissecting it in such a short amount of time.

Therefore... The magic cast on Kold did its job...and did it well.

“Is—is he dead?”

“Yes. Unfortunately.”

I failed to get verbal evidence out of him, but there was nothing I could do at this point. I had a solid inkling of the mastermind’s identity. It wasn’t like they were going to try anything on us anytime soon. At the moment, it was enough

for us to keep a close eye out for related activities.

“At any rate, this case is now closed, and we have completed the task for the pope... We have no further business here. Let us be going.”

“R-right. I’m with you there, but...what do we do about the body?”

“There is no need to worry. His Eminence will settle any remaining issues.”

After all, he was undoubtedly watching us *at that very moment*.

“Something else requires our attention: what to do about Mr. Bordeaux. Everything else will come later.”

“Yeah. Let’s go tell him we’ve solved the case.”

I nodded in agreement, casting detection magic to locate Bordeaux.

...He seemed to be in his office. It figured that he didn’t heed our warning to hide.

I sighed as we left the room.

The servants weren’t yet aware of what had happened to their master. There was no need to go out of our way to tell them, so we silently slipped through the hall, across the courtyard, and out the front gate.

“...By the way, Ireena, the citizens here follow the bell to a T, huh?”

“What? Yeah. That’s because they’re devout believers of the United Creed.”

The ringing of the church bell dictated their actions, and its orders were absolute.

For example, the populace stopped and took their lunch at the sound of the noonday bell. Daily life in Megatholium was almost entirely commanded by the church.

“What about it?”

“...There’s something I find a bit weird.” I subconsciously quickened my pace. As I did, I voiced the root of my unease. “The bell signaling the start of evening has already come and gone...which means most of the citizens should have returned home. But for some reason, many are still gathered outside Mr. Bordeaux’s office.”

“Huh? Wh-why would that be?”

“I’m not sure. I cannot suss out the situation through detection magic alone. Maybe he extended his hours, or...”

Or maybe some other problem was going on. I was just thinking this...

“—! A-Ard!” Ireena tapped my shoulder, pointing at the distant sky. Her trembling finger pointed to...a billow of thick gray smoke.

“Mr. Bordeaux’s office is over there...!”

Shit, I thought as I cast teleportation magic. I usually didn’t use it, because it was so rare in the modern era.

However, this was an emergency.

Our vision went dark, and the scenery shifted. We scrambled down the main road to Bordeaux’s office.

When we got there...Ireena and I gaped at the scene in front of us.

“Tell me I’m dreaming,” I breathed, praying this was a trick of the eye.

I knew Ireena was seeing what I was looking at—Bordeaux’s office going up in flames.

The citizens were cheering.

“Serves you right, monster!”

“How dare you try to pull one over on us!”

“Go to hell, you dirty demon!”

How did they find out? I thought I’d altered the memories of anyone who found out his true form.

...I guess theorizing would have to wait.

“H-hey, Ard. Where’s Mr. Bordeaux? Is he okay?”

“.....”

“Well, he *is* a demon. He’s tougher than us. Even if they try to burn him alive, he can handle it, right?”

“.....”

“Hey, Ard?”

“.....”

“Hey. Say something.”

Ireena must have had an idea about what happened to him. However, we didn't know for sure. Until I said otherwise...Ireena would continue to believe what was easiest to believe.

“...Yes, I'm certain everything is fine. It seems Mr. Bordeaux was expecting this. He intentionally waited at his office and allowed the people to burn it down so he could fake his own death. This must be his way of preparing to move to a new land.”

“You're right. After all, they found out he's a demon. He's gotta clear his name and start fresh. I bet he's thinking that if he pretends to die here, he can get a fresh start and work hard elsewhere.”

“...I think you're right.”

She must have started to piece it together. Her eyes pooled with tears.

...I know. I had just lied to her.

Demons have tough bodies. Even without defense magic, they could endure this heat.

However, that was in their half-beast form. In their human guise and without magic to defend them...he was no different from the rest of us.

“Mr. Bordeaux must be heartbroken. Let us leave him be for a while.”

“Yeah... I bet he wants to be alone right now... Someday...I hope we can...”

Ireena never finished her sentence.

The office burned to the ground.

The people laughed over its ashes.

As the dark side of humanity showed itself before me...

...All I could do was clench my fists.



CHAPTER 65

The Ex-Demon Lord Before the Meeting

A good man had met a tragic end.

No one considered it of any significance in the grand scheme of the world.

The sun rose with a new day, even though darkness settled over us.

And...a new morning always came at dawn.

Birds were chirping. Sunlight poured down on the city.

The window offered a view of early-morning activities.

I imagined the faces of the pedestrians would be glowing like any other day.

Except one man could not be found among the crowd.

...Two days had passed since that wretched evening. I was in the dining hall at the manor, having breakfast with Rosa. Ireena was absent.

For those two days, Ireena had closed herself away from the world, locking herself in her room as soon as we returned to the manor. Even though I've known her for all these years, I'd never seen her like this. I knew Rosa was feeling the same way. She was initially surprised by her melancholy...but she pressed me as to what was going on with Ireena.

After I explained what had happened, Rosa's reply was short.

"...I see."

That was it. I mean, what else could she have said?

Rosa and I decided to give Ireena space. We would believe she'd get back on her feet on her own if she could.

"...Say, Ard."

Silverware clinked against porcelain in the dining hall. Rosa was trying to talk

over it.

“Tomorrow is the assembly. However...I think it might be best for Ireena to sit out.”

I stopped eating and looked at her for a few seconds. “If she’s absent, I can’t serve as your guard. I don’t have to explain why, right?”

Rosa shook her head somberly.

If Ireena was just another student, I would have attended the meeting as Rosa’s guard. However, that wasn’t the case: Ireena’s social standard was not ordinary, which was why I couldn’t exactly leave her side.

She was a descendant of the Evil Gods, which made her a target of the demons...in particular, Lars al Ghul, the crime syndicate. They believed the Evil Gods could be resurrected if they sacrificed her soul in a ceremony. Under these circumstances, I had to guard Ireena around the clock. It was my responsibility to bear.

“Those hiding away in Megatholium have been subdued...but we must remain vigilant,” she said.

“Yes. They might be in disguise, waiting for the right opportunity to strike.”

They could be scheming an act of terrorism during the conference...or...use that as a decoy to abduct Ireena.

“I’m guessing the demons have two main goals. One is to cause terror. The other is to kidnap Ireena. I am doing my best to prevent both objectives, but...if I had to make a choice, I’ll always choose Ireena.”

“Indeed. If she is not mentally there by tomorrow, we shall have a proxy guard me in thy stead. Stay by her side.”

I had just started to nod back at Rosa. The door to the dining hall burst open, making way for a frantic servant.

“A-a guest has arrived.”

Rosa and I exchanged a look, experiencing a sense of déjà vu.

As if to re-create his visit from a few days prior...a certain man made his

entrance.

"I apologize for interrupting your morning meal once again. I'm short on time these days. I hope you will forgive me."

Lizer Bellphoenix. His Eminence strolled into the dining hall, locking eyes with Rosa.

"...I'm sorry, but would you mind stepping out for a moment?"

"Understood. Please take as long as necessary, Your Eminence." Rosa rose to her feet, obliging his request and departing the dining hall.

After confirming she was gone, Lizer settled into a chair and let out a groan.

"*Phew*. These papal duties are too much for this old body to bear."

"...Isn't that necessary to construct your ideal vision of society?"

"Indeed. That's why I cannot stop nor compromise."

Our voices were gentle, but our gazes were steely. I stared at the wrinkled face of my former subordinate.

"Does your visit today have anything to do with the previous incident?"

"Yes. I'd hoped to visit immediately after the case was resolved...but I'm afraid I was caught up with business."

"I can imagine. You have my deepest gratitude for taking time out of your busy schedule."

"Think nothing of it. Speaking with you makes it worth it."

We resumed glaring at each other, letting silence wash over us. It was almost suffocating in here. You could cut the tension with a knife. Our hairs stood on end.

Lizer broke the silence.

"I heard the details of the case from my subordinates. Allow me to thank you for your hard work."

"Thank you. I am pleased to hear your praise."

"Yes... I am not here to hear a summary of the case. I've come to ask you a

question.”

“...What could that be?” My eyebrows knit together.

He appraised me. “Now that you’ve experienced all this, have your opinions changed?”

As soon as he expressed this, I was sure of one thing: He was the one behind all this.

From our reunion until this very moment, I had been dancing in the palm of his hand.

“...Did you use Mr. Bordeaux’s life just to ask me that?”

“Answering a question with a question? That’s not polite.”

“I knew something was off when I discovered Mr. Bordeaux’s identity. There’s no way his conspicuous presence would escape your notice. You would know his true self with a single glance. You left him alone on purpose—all so you could use him as a pawn. That was the purpose of this incident.”

Lizer said nothing. He simply stared at me as I verbally beat him.

“I am proud to say that the citizens of Megatholium enjoy one of the highest standards of living in the world,” he said. “Our laws ensure it. Our education system leaves nothing to be desired... Even so, the results are just as you have experienced.”

His eyes gleamed. It was a dangerous glimmer that revealed his inner self.

“I was hopeful, too—hopeful that I would be proven wrong. Hopeful that people would make the right choice. But in the end, this was their decision.”

“.....”

“As a citizen of Megatholium, Bordeaux was a true saint. He could heal any ailment. He didn’t even request payment. He was filled with love and charity. You might even call him a paradigm of humanity.”

“.....”

“Everyone loved and respected him. Even those in the black market. Even those who committed crimes without batting an eye. All held a certain degree

of regard for him...which is the same for you, Ard Meteor, and for Ireena Litz de Olhyde. Your current situations are identical. And that is why...”

“.....”

“That is why I can say this with certainty: One day, you will face the same fate. Humans are disgusting creatures. Even if they are head over heels for you, they will turn on you in the next moment—when they realize you’re both mutants.”

“.....”

“So maybe they extended kindness to you, or formed bonds with you, or expressed their love for you. In the end, discriminatory feelings will override any positive ones. That’s human nature. They fear the unknown. They despise it. They want to get rid of it. That is the true essence of humanity. That is why there will always be tragedy in this world. However, if a *savior* appeared—”

“Thank you for sharing your opinion.”

I didn’t care about anything else he had to say.

Lizer Bellphoenix...I’d thought he’d changed when we reunited, but I was wrong. He wasn’t any different from before. He had stayed the same all this time. Lizer was a man who could switch off compassion and morals if it meant sticking to his principles. If that core was unchanging...any discussion was meaningless.

As if picking up on my feelings, Lizer sighed and quietly got to his feet. “... Don’t forget how this incident made you feel.”

And with that, Lizer went to leave.

I called out to him in a cold voice. “I see. So maybe humans *are* pathetic. You know...I believe we should detest egoism. We ought to scorn those who use others and ruin lives for their own gain.”

“I must agree. However...do think about how those words reflect on you as well.”

Lizer spat this out and withdrew once again.



By the end of our conversation, the food on my plate had grown cold—as cold

as my heart. To distract myself from this feeling of irritation from the discussion, I took a bite.

“...Hmm. It’s really, really cold.”

After the meal, I left the dining hall and made my way to Ireena’s room. For some reason, I had an insatiable desire to talk to her. I wanted to see her face.

“...Ireena.” I stood in front of the door and knocked. “It’s Ard. Could we talk for a bit? Even just a little bit.”

No answer. She must not have recovered yet.

...That was fair.

I stood in front of the closed door and remembered that night. One by one, the civilians slipped away from the scene of the fire. In the meantime, Holy Knights arrived and went to work.

There was no trace of his existence left behind on this planet. It had crumbled under the fire.

To extinguish the blaze, the knights had taken apart the building as we gazed at the burning edifice. I’ll never forget the look on Ireena’s face—utter despair at the state of humanity... That would be a dark memory that I carried within me for the rest of my days.

“...Ireena. Please. At least drink some water. You must take care of yourself.”

I was about to retreat to my own room, when...

“Come in...”

I could hear Ireena’s fragile voice come from the other side of the door. I stopped for a moment, then went back toward her room. I grabbed the handle, turned it...and opened the door.

“Pardon me,” I said as I stepped inside and took in Ireena.

She looked a bit haggard but not sick.

...I imagined her mind was at greater risk than her body. Sitting upright on the bed, she was squeezing a pillow as she stared at the floor. Her puffy eyes didn’t even look in my direction, even when she started to talk to me.

“Hey, Ard. Tell me the truth.”

“...All right.”

“Did Mr. Bordeaux die?”

“...Yes. He did.”

Ireena tightened her grip on the pillow as she asked another question.

“But it hasn’t been three days and three nights since he died, right?”

“...That is correct.”

“In that case, can’t we bring Mr. Bordeaux back?”

I nodded in agreement, and Ireena looked at me for the first time. There was a little glimmer of hope in her hollow eyes.

“Hey, Ard. Bring Mr. Bordeaux—”

“It would be meaningless,” I interrupted, rejecting her idea.

It pained me. In all honesty...I wanted to make Ireena’s sweet delusion a reality.

But that was impossible.

“Ireena. Let me take a guess. You want me to resurrect Mr. Bordeaux so we can cheer him up and become his support system. You want to persuade the citizens to come back around and return him to his happy life.”

“...Can’t you do that? I *know* you can do it—and well.”

“Yes. But...all I can do is create a pleasant facade to blot out the lies—a form of happiness that’s very superficial.”

Although it hurt me to admit this, I told Ireena the truth. We could no longer afford to turn away from reality.

“As you said, I can resurrect Mr. Bordeaux. But...is that what he wants? When we saw him last, he appeared to be anguished, but it looked like he was intimately familiar with this emotion. His heart must have already been broken by that point.”

“.....”

“He spent his entire life loving and saving people...but was always betrayed in the end. As soon as his identity came to light, people would fear him, persecute him, and drive him away. Yet he *wanted* to believe in them. He wanted to believe they would accept him in time.”

“.....”

“But the constant rejection wore down his psyche...and that was when his heart snapped. Only despair remained, and his love for people...was nowhere to be found.”

Tears began to flood her eyes as she looked at me. Her peach lips quivered... but she remained silent.

Seeing her like that broke my own heart, but I had to continue explaining this to her.

“Mr. Bordeaux didn’t want to reconcile... In fact, he didn’t even want to live. And what about the people? They’re out there, celebrating the defeat of the foreign entity. They haven’t the slightest intention to reconcile or coexist... There is only one way to join the two, and that’s by using magic to brainwash them.”

“...That’s...”

“It’s wrong. I know. However, that’s the only way for your dreams to become reality—by using magic to control Mr. Bordeaux and the people of Megatholium and construct a happy life for them... It would be no different than a small child playing with dolls... As for myself, Ireena, that is the last thing I wish to do.”

I had done it before, back in my old life. I had done it until the moment of my death. I had built the world of my visions. But the truth was, it was a repulsive game of make-believe. I wouldn’t do that again. Ever.

“...So what do I do?”

Ireena’s voice was strained. Her lips trembled, and tears escaped her dewy eyes. “I *do* understand. I know it’s all useless, and there’s nothing we can do. But...but it’s all too much! I can’t believe he isn’t with us anymore...! That’s...! That’s...! That’s just not right...!”

She buried her face in the pillow, and her entire body trembled.

...I hated to admit we wouldn't be so hurt if this tragedy didn't remind us of ourselves. Maybe we would have been shocked, but it wouldn't take long before we went on with our own lives—accepting it as just one tragedy among many. After a good night's sleep, we would have just moved on.

However...Bordeaux was too much like us.

We were irregulars like him and adored like him. Our situations were essentially the same.

And that was why we'd seen ourselves in him. We wondered whether we would one day experience the misfortune that had befallen Bordeaux. Our hearts gnawed on good will, righteous indignation, and sympathy.

But...as painful and heartrending as the situation was, we had to overcome this.

Even if we were struck by grief, even if we detested the cruelty of humankind, the world would continue to move. And we had to keep on living in it.

"...Ireena. Do you remember his last words?"

She nodded, face still buried in the pillow.

I went on. "It was a message for Carmilla...our classmate, a demon. He said she mustn't forget her love for humanity. To keep believing in people... However, I cannot help but think that his message was for us as well."

I quietly stared at Ireena's unmoving form.

"Love people and believe in them... We can carry on his will for the rest of our lives."

I really wasn't sure whether my words had reached Ireena.

Regardless, time didn't wait for us. Morning became afternoon, then turned to night.

And it was a new dawn.

I prayed there would be a ray of sunlight creeping into her heart.

It was the morning of the Five Powers summit.

CHAPTER 66

The Ex-Demon Lord and the Assembly of the Five Powers

“...So the day has come,” Queen Rosa murmured, frowning in the dining hall over breakfast.

Even though it had been a while since we sat down, the plate before her remained largely untouched. Maybe she wasn’t feeling well. Her face was looking a little pale.

“You must eat something. Otherwise, you won’t be able to get through the day,” warned Prime Minister Valdr, but he looked worried about the queen’s welfare. “I’m certain Your Majesty knows...this meeting is a gathering of world leaders. If you arrive looking as fragile as you do now...”

“I know. I shall do my best to play the role of a hardened queen that none shall dare look down upon. There is nothing to fear.”

...Observing this exchange took me back to my old life. I always had to act like a confident king around everyone, even though I sorely lacked ambition and looked more like a little girl. I frequently failed to meet expectations and found myself scolded by Olivia and others in my inner circle.

Well, that was back in my early days. By the end, even I had adjusted to my kingly role.

...Ironically enough, I had decided to reincarnate because I’d become what other people envisioned for me.

I continued eating as I thought about this.

Hardly anything was left on my plate, yet Rosa hadn’t eaten even half of hers. She really didn’t look very well, and it didn’t seem like she had much of an appetite. The gravity of the upcoming meeting might have been weighing on her. It was like looking at my former self...

So I naturally tossed her a lifeline.

“Your Majesty. If you are feeling unwell, it is best if you do not force yourself to eat. It is crucial to nourish yourself before a critical event, but any more than this might do more harm than good.”

Rosa and Valdr looked at me, and I went on.

“I hope you’ll forgive this simple commoner...but I believe it’s important to stand my ground on occasion. This meeting is a momentous occasion. However, the fate of the nation is not at risk here. You ought to treat it as a get together and act irresponsibly to a reasonable degree.”

The two said absolutely nothing.

Rosa’s silence was one thing. I tilted my head to the side when Valdr refused to talk more. I was expecting him to blow up in my face and bark that he’d never forgive me for my lowly commoner attitude or something. All he did was wordlessly close his eyes. A frown creased across his brow. Rosa stared at the table, clearly intent on saying nothing. Their reactions were undeniably odd.

I felt a tinge of confusion...when finally, Rosa broke the silence.

“...I am worried about Ireena,” she admitted quietly.

So that explained her poor health. It wasn’t just the pressure of the meeting that was getting to her. She was concerned about her friend.

Not that it made it any easier to comment. If I had to say anything, I’d say...

“We can only trust that she will find her way.”

“...Yes.”

“Ireena is strong. I’m certain she will appear any moment—”

I was just about to vocalize some wishful thinking...when my dreams became reality.

The door to the dining hall creaked open, and my dear friend stood before us.

“Ireena!” I shouted on reflex.

She didn’t look quite back to her usual self, but...

“Sorry for worrying you. I’m okay now.”

Life had returned to her eyes.

I imagined she had come across some kind of answer. My heart rejoiced at her recovery.

Rosa seemed to feel the same way.

“Thou hast come. Breakfast is thy favorite, Ireena.”

“Oh, you’re right. Hee-hee, this is just what I was in the mood for.”

Rosa looked at her and smiled. However...the queen still looked terrible. In fact, she seemed to be getting worse. Could she attend the meeting at this rate?

...Well, that was neither here nor there. After all, our focus was on Ireena. Sitting at my side, she looked at me and whispered quietly.

“I will live life to the fullest. For his sake and mine.... I will believe in the beauty of humanity.”

She sounded certain of herself. I couldn’t help but smile.

Yes. That’s the spirit.

I celebrated my friend’s recovery and took a bite of my breakfast.

It was delicious, even though it had grown cold...



Now that Ireena had made a comeback, we could continue the task at hand. Rosa had arranged for a replacement guard in the event that Ireena couldn’t leave her room...but now everything was back on schedule.

The clock continued to tick forward. The bell signaled the time. To the citizens, this indicated that it was almost noon, but for us, it held one other meaning.

The meeting of the Five Powers.

It was a huge event that was likely to go down in history. The stage was set in Megatholium’s greatest house of worship, the Var Felte Cathedral. It was in a block near the heart of the city known as the Holy Sector.

Var Felte was different from the other houses of worship in the world.

Most churches were just places to offer prayers, while Var Felte served multiple purposes. Its edifice took up almost half the Holy Sector and served as the heart of the holy nation of Megatholium. At the center of the world's greatest cathedral was an array of necessary facilities—the courthouse and parliament, including a small building used for holding discussions. Though the structure was simple, it was surrounded by the other facilities and protected by defense magic. Furthermore, the perimeter was guarded by Holy Knights, and the risk of something going awry was slim to none.

...As we listened to our guide explain these facts, we entered the facility, where we were led down the hallway to a designated room.

“Phew. Well then, let us start this decisive battle.”

“You can do it, Rosie!”

“Yes, so I shall... Now, then...”

Looking ready, Rosa turned the knob and opened the door.

The room was spacious with a round table at its center. The other leaders were already seated in place.

“Ah, so you finally cared to join us. Lavillians are such sloths,” a man cursed, looking us up and down.

He was a dwarf. He looked to be about sixty, but dwarves appeared older than their actual age, so I imagined he was a few years younger. His name was Buffer Zelanon.

Since his real name was so long, he almost always used an alias. The Republic of Goldenia was one of Laville's powerful neighbors, and Buffer served as its head of state.

“As the one guiding this continent, I bear the weight of mine authority, which slows my pace. Thou cannot quell thy jealousy, Buffer. The life as a small-time ruler from a shitty, backwoods nation? That must be easy, indeed. I wish I could take this load off.”

“...I see. In that case, why don't I chop off those hands and feet? You'll feel

lighter then.”

Rosa and Buffer shot daggers at each other.

It wasn't unusual for there to be bad blood between neighboring nations. Laville and Goldenia were no exception, and they had clashed in the past for various reasons. If the pope hadn't called them together, and Lars al Ghul wasn't on the move, these two nations would have never considered a peace treaty. Not in a million years.

...There was one other such pair.

“Ho-ho. You two are getting along as well as ever. Till death do you part, Laville, Goldenia,” wished a woman who spoke the continent's lingua franca with a unique lilt.

She was an elf rumored to be past her seventies. Since elves remained forever young, she appeared to be the very picture of a lovely maiden.

She was Eljuna Vyheim, empress of the Vyheim Empire. Her eyes seemed to be frozen in a perpetual smile, and she hid her mouth behind a fan as she focused on the man sitting across from her.

“It would be a fine thing if our nations could live in harmony. Don't you agree, Sir Zelos?”

“.....Hmph,” replied the provoked beast person.

This handsome figure in the prime of his life was more soldier than national leader. He gave off an aura not unlike Olivia, and I remembered I'd heard they shared an ancestor. Maybe that was why he wasn't a follower of the United Creed himself. He apparently adhered to the Black Wolf Order that worshipped Olivia instead.

His name was Zelos vel Zine. He was president of the Federal States of Saphiria.

“Well...I believe it is about time I took my seat.” Rosa plopped down. Prime Minister Valdr drew the seat next to her.

Ireena and I remained standing behind them as guards.

“...It appears *someone* is not here yet,” the queen commented.

“Hah. Might as well just do us a favor and stay home. I ain’t in the mood to see that mug. Give me a Lavillian any day,” Buffer replied.

“Rude. That person has one or two positive qualities... Though I must admit, none come to mind,” Eljuna added.

“...I would agree with Sir Buffer. If His Eminence were here, I would have proposed beginning without him.”

Everyone looked uncomfortable. Even though they had rocky relationships with one another, this was something they could all agree on.

The ruler of a *certain nation* was infamously detested across the continent, but...I never imagined it was this bad.

There used to be people like that, back in ancient times. And by that, I mean me.

...It seemed our situations were similar, but...was he a revolutionary like me... or a barbaric king as rumored?

I figured that out the moment he walked in without warning.

“Whew.”

I thought I heard a voice from the hallway. That was followed by a small-scale blast. Our eyes snapped toward the door, which now had a gaping hole...and rising from the ashes was a man with an excited voice that was woefully out of place.

“Hey, guys! Did I getcha? I bet I did! Heh-heh-heh! I just wanted to treat you to a surprise!”

He flapped his arms to clear the smoke as he stepped into the room. The most beautiful women of every race waited upon him.

“...Thou never change.”

“Ugh. You’re so annoying.”

“I’m pleased to see you on cloud nine... Wish you would blast off to the heavens.”

“.....Tch.”

It wasn't just the leaders. Everyone present, even their aides and guards, looked at him with disdain.

Even so...the man didn't show the least bit of concern, flashing a cocky grin at us.

He was apparently in his late thirties, but his appearance and behavior weren't very adult. He was an orc...maybe even half elf. His skin was dark green, but he lacked tusks. His facial features were more androgynous and refined than a typical orc.

His name was Dread Ben Hurr, the man who united countless tribes into one nation and reigned as leader of the Asylas Federation.

"Sorry for being late, guys! I kiiinda had to answer nature's call! Gotta prep mind *and* body before a big shindig, y'know? Don't be shy! Hee-hee-hee-hee!"

His immature speech and innocent malevolence reminded me of Verda.

But...while the mad scientist was born as a pervert, I was having some suspicions about this Dread fellow.

On the one hand, it looked like he was putting on a show to seem crazy. On the other, he could actually be a mad despot.

...He must have noticed I was appraising him, because he zeroed in on me.

"Hmm? My, my, my! Look what the cat brought in! This pretty boy must be the rumored Ard Meteor?"

"...That's me."

"Aha! I knew it! I've heard tales of your heroism!"

"...You're too kind."

"I bet the ladies are all over you! I mean, you're a catch! You look good! And you're born to a good family! I bet you think my sex servants are human garbage. Right? No quality! No quantity! Right? Right? Right? Right? Right? Riiiiight?"

He was pressing me with his interrogation. Dread rolled his head around and around.

And around and around and around and around...

His eyes rolled back. It was seriously creepy. It was making everyone nauseous.

Meanwhile, I was still sizing up the man before me.

Was he a madman? Maybe he was only pretending to be one—

“Aaaaaah. Your eyes are pissing me off. Enough. You’re goin’ down.”

At that very moment...Dread struck with his right hand.

“You’re joking!” barked Buffer, eyes wide.

Dread had unleashed attack magic, a magic circle forming at his fingertips. A beat later, a giant ball of flame whizzed toward us.

“How violent,” I observed, shrugging as I faced Dread and our agitated audience.

I had cast defense magic—spawning a transparent barrier over us and providing protection. Dread’s fireball crashed into it, detonating...but it didn’t even scratch our shield.

“Casting high-level defense magic without chanting anything? Not bad.”

It was actually a low-level spell, but I wasn’t about to correct him.

Dread and I faced each other, squinting through the billowing smoke. He was still raring to go, with no regard about destroying the place.

“In that case, I’ll get a li’l more serious with this next one—”

The other four leaders exploded in rage.

“Hey, quit messing around, asshole...!”

“We shall not allow thee to continue thy savagery.”

“If you do not take a seat quietly, I’ll employ a few ideas of my own.”

“...Go ahead and keep at it—if you have a death wish.”

Buffer shouldered his mallet. Eljuna held her staff at the ready. Rosa and Zelos unsheathed their treasured swords. The guards surrounded them protectively.

Even when faced with the wrath of the four leaders, Dread wasn't the least bit cowed. He spun his head around.

"Huuuh? Are you guys siding with Ard? Fine... Be that way..." Dread's mouth twisted into a wide smile. "I think it would be wonderful if you all died!"

With basically a declaration of war, he went to cast another technique—"That is far enough," boomed a dignified voice.

The temperature in the room instantly dropped, which was an illusion, of course.

The newcomer radiated murder. That stopped everyone in their tracks. Even Dread.

"Aw! Time's up?" He pouted in disappointment and looked at our most recent arrival.

It was the pope, Lizer Bellphoenix. He was in his formal regalia. His presence made everyone break out in a cold sweat, except me. They silently waited for his next words.

Having gained their full attention, he sighed.

"...I apologize for my tardiness. If only I had arrived a bit earlier, this uproar would have never occurred," he said, walking farther into the room.

He sat at the head of the table.

"We shall let bygones be bygones...and commence the meeting immediately."

It didn't matter if you disagreed. Once this man took control, there was no room for argument. As the pope and a Legendary Apostle, Lizer's word was law.

Buffer, Eljuna, Rosa, Zelos. The leaders of four major powers reluctantly laid down their arms and slumped back in their seats. Dread did a complete about-face and nonchalantly plunked himself down, whistling a merry tune. Then, he looked over at me.

"I'll remember your name and face. In return...I'd love it if you did the same for me."

He gave a disturbing, self-satisfied smile. There was not an ounce of

comradery. In fact, it was...downright deadly. His expression told me he'd kill me someday.

"...That certainly is something."

There was always at least one like him in every era. In the old days, idiots had picked fights with me over stupid things. That's why I didn't spare Dread a second thought.

What mattered here was the meeting. What sort of particulars would go down?

I observed the proceedings, deeply interested in their affairs...



The meeting of the Five Powers may have started off with a literal bang, but the discussion was exceptionally uneventful...

It was over without fanfare. Nothing happened. At all.

First, they outlined the conditions of the treaty, but the contents were so satisfactory that no one had anything to say about them... What followed was a cookie-cutter exchange like any other.

"Let us be vigilant of Lars al Ghul."

"Yes."

"We mustn't break the treaty."

"Agreed."

After a few hours of this...the bell rang noon.

"Sigh. Well then, that concludes our meeting."

It was anticlimactic by all accounts.

"...That was...different than I expected," Ireena offered somewhat disappointedly.

I nodded. It was a good thing we got through it without running into any problems.

...Well, I guess you could say it wasn't over yet.

“Well then. A ceremony will be held in the central plaza as discussed.”

We would be done after we went through with the ceremony. We stood up and exited the room to head to the finale.

Then, as we were walking along in succession...

“.....Ard Meteor. Ireena Litz de Olhyde.”

Someone called out to us. Flanked by male bodyguards was the president of the Federal States of Saphiria himself, Zelos.

“Wh-wh-wh-wh-what may we do for you?!” Ireena squeaked, inexperienced in dealing with foreign dignitaries.

Zelos’s face was blank. “...Relay a message to Lady Olivia for me: *I am your ladyship’s ally.*”

There seemed to be a lot packed into that sentence. However, before I could ask for the true meaning, he stalked away.

“Wh-what was that about?”

“...Who knows? In any case, we’ll deliver his message to Lady Olivia.”

After that, we left the cathedral and made our way to the central plaza without having to deal with anyone else.

Since it was a considerable distance away, each nation had decided to go by carriage as a safety precaution. We set about boarding our own vehicle as citizens of Laville. Ireena got in first, followed by Valdr and me, with Rosa last.

...What an odd order to board. The monarch normally took the lead.

I questioned this as I was about to climb in when...

“...Ard, listen up.” Rosa tugged my sleeve and whispered close to my ear. “...Dost thou remember my words the night we arrived?”

“...I believe you said to protect Ireena no matter what.”

Why was she asking me this now?

“Listen closely. Do not break that promise. It is Ireena thou must protect. I do not mind if thou cast me aside. Protect Ireena.”

Then she stuffed me into the carriage, thereby ending this conversation.

...There was no question we were heading toward the end game. I prayed the proceedings would be peaceful.

And...I wished my *prediction* would be proven wrong.

I slammed the carriage door shut.

CHAPTER 67

The Ex-Demon Lord and the Bright Side of Humanity, Part I

Once a month, the believers of Megatholium gathered together.

At these gatherings, Lizer would stand on a stage in the central plaza and preach to the masses. Apparently, the majority of citizens participated, making it an event befitting of a land known as a holy nation.

The citizens of Megatholium treated this gathering as a sacred affair meant to renew their faith, but...did they even choose to revere these events of their own free will?

I couldn't help but wonder if something else was going on. Brainwashing, to be precise. They might be targeting this mass of people and using magic to mentally control them to a certain degree.

...Speaking from past experience of my own rule.

One might say Megatholium was Lizer's attempt to re-create the world from those last ancient days. In that case, I imagined he would copy my ways of governing, too. Even so, he'd failed to create a perfect replica, and I was certain he never would succeed in the future.

It was incredibly difficult to use magic that manipulated brains. Even in the ancient world, it was rare to come by someone with enough mastery over the skill to impose their will or take control of the target. Even if it *was* feasible, it was hard to succeed—especially if the target was secure in their convictions or rejected these foreign thoughts from their body.

I was no exception. That was why I had resorted to using violence, reigning with fear to control the people in those last days—on top of my brainwashing method.

I thought back on the errors of my ways. Damn. I hated past me.

As one of the participants, I joined Ireena, Rosa, and Valdr as we made our way to the stage.

The stage in the plaza was dripping with extravagant decorations, signifying the importance of the ceremony.

That wasn't just the case for the trapezoidal stage, which was sizable enough to look out upon the people. Even the connected pathway and stairs were lined with luxury.

Like the other guards, Ireena and I flanked our leader, maintaining a protective stance, keeping a fixed distance away from the nations around us as we inched forward.

"I'm having a hard time wrapping my head around this plush carpet lining the procession... It seems almost *too* fancy," Ireena commented.

"Well, this day will go down in the history books. I guess this is the standard."

After we continued down the carpet and climbed the stairs...we finally joined the other nations onstage.

"Wow... What an amazing view...," Ireena breathed out in awe as she stared down at the scene before her.

About 90 percent of Megatholium's total populace had gathered. Several hundred thousand strong. The plaza was packed with people—standing shoulder to shoulder.

At that moment, we had the attention of each one of them.

"I address the public on occasion...but I do believe this is mine first time standing before such a crowd." Rosa's face grew tense with worry, but she let it relax into her usual smile. "Ah well, 'tis no matter... After all, Ard is by our side."

"That's right! Even if we mess up, Ard will save the day!"

"...Leave it to me."

We made our way to center stage where five seats had been neatly lined up. They were made to look like thrones... One might say they were props that coincided with the ceremony's purpose of bringing together the Five Powers.

Like the other leaders, Rosa sat in her seat. Prime Minister Valdr assumed his place behind her, while Ireena and I guarded them on both sides.

Holy Knights stood shoulder to shoulder all around us. They really weren't taking any chances.

Once the leaders of the Five Powers had settled in their seats, Lizer approached the podium, announcing the ceremony was about to begin using a voice-amplifying magic device.

"There have been three major wars that have plagued the continent throughout our history. Include minor skirmishes, and that number soars to two thousand battles—or more. Ever since the passing of the Demon Lord, we have been engaging in war after war, endlessly. But today, that all changes. Peace will be upon this continent once again. His utopia will be realized once more."

Lizer's speech moved the people. Hundreds of thousands started to cheer, bursting into an enthusiastic frenzy, exalting this historic achievement. I thought it would rupture our eardrums, but Lizer carried on with the ceremony in a solemn and stately manner.

"Uh, thanks, man. I'm Buffer. I gotta be honest with ya, I ain't great at this sort of thing, but—"

Each leader gave a little speech, and after all that was over, Lizer was going to formally announce the conditions of the treaty and give his closing remarks.

...According to the schedule.

Each leader finished their speech. I casually observed the proceedings for some time, then...I suddenly caught sight of Rosa's face beside me.

...Call it nerves, but she looked paler than that morning. Beads of sweat dotted her forehead, and her lips were trembling uncontrollably.

I was about to say something to her, but it was her turn to go.

"Go get 'em, Rosie!" Ireena cheered, sounding like she was rooting on a friend at the school festival. She offered a gentle smile.

"....." Rosa stood and continued to silently stare at Ireena for a few beats. Then, she dispelled her nerves with a long breath and broke into a gentle smile

that transformed her entire face. "...Ireena, think of only thine own happiness."

Ireena kinked her eyebrows as she processed this enigmatic command that came out of nowhere. Rosa turned away and strolled to the front of the podium without looking back.

"...Haaah." She gazed out over the audience with a sigh before facing Lizer.

Her eyes held...pity.

She turned back toward the people, bringing the magic amplification device to her lips to begin.

"I've felt lost for these past few days. The scales before me are in perpetual equilibrium; they lean not in either direction, preventing me from coming to a decision until now."

Her tone was neither lost nor hesitant, but the citizens started to stir, trying to figure out the meaning of her speech.

"What are you talking about, Queen of Laville...?"

"Scales? Does that mean a decision of some sort?"

This rippled through the crowd. It was not only them. The leaders of the other nations and Ireena were just as baffled.

Only three people in this entire place could guess her intentions.

Prime Minister Valdr. Pope Lizer.

And me, Ard Meteor.

...So this was what it was amounting to. As I sensed my predictions coming to light, I began to ready myself for the next development.

Meanwhile, Rosa continued with her speech. "As a politician, I know this decision is wrong. But while I am queen, I am a person. Therefore..."

This was when she spun around. Her eyes stared pointedly at Prime Minister Valdr. The loyal retainer's eyes were now wide, and he was drenched in sweat. He shook his head subtly to make his feelings known, but...her lips curled into a heartbreaking smile.

She turned back toward the audience.

“I choose my friend’s happiness! I have no intention of supporting the pope!”

Every face on display had been struck dumb—from the audience to the participants. None could comprehend it.

The people remained dead silent...until finally they began to shout in confusion.

“What is she talking about? What friend?”

“Why isn’t she supporting the pope? What’s going on?”

“I can’t believe this... Is she trying to back out of the peace treaty?”

They were starting to voice their suspicions. Panic spread through the citizens like a wave.

“Your Eminence! I have something I must say!” Prime Minister Valdr spat, as if he had a mouth full of blood.



His face looked ghastly...but there was also something insincere about it. It felt completely rehearsed, as if his words and behavior had been decided beforehand.

Valdr wasn't the only one taking action. Lizer began to make his move. "...Speak," he commanded.

Valdr scurried toward the front of the podium. He clenched his fists as he passed Rosa but did nothing. As all eyes trained on him, he raised his voice to address the crowd.

"The Laville Empire of Sorcery has been hiding a certain truth this entire time! That is—"

He'd said too much. I already knew what this preface would bring...

However...there was an anti-magic technique cast over this place.

Which meant I couldn't cast any spells.

...I couldn't make Valdr shut up and prevent the worst from happening.

"We didn't just fail to deal with descendants of the Evil Gods! We're lauding them as Heroic Barons, weaponizing this family for our own political exploits! These acts betray the Great Demon Lord and his followers! Therefore, I, Prime Minister Valdr, implore you, Your Eminence! Bring down the hammer of justice on Rosa, the traitor who dares to call herself queen!!" he shrieked, eyes flooded with tears.

It seemed like he was at capacity.

I took a deep breath and looked next to me. "...Ireena, remain calm," I said.

No reply.

It didn't seem reality had hit her yet. Her face was slack, and she didn't make the slightest movement.

...Meanwhile, the situation continued to unfold before us, almost cruelly.

I knew this would happen. We were plunging headfirst into the worst imaginable future.

"I applaud your confession. Ah, but...it is a most gruesome truth. It isn't just

that descendants of the Evil Gods exist in this world... I cannot believe one of the Five Powers has sheltered and used them for their political ends.”

Lizer’s behavior was excessively theatrical, and I couldn’t help but have my suspicions.

The people seemed to be eating this up. They saw His Eminence as justice incarnate, which made them easily swayed. Valdr’s confession had steered the topic away from Rosa’s mysterious declaration, but the masses were too busy to pick up on how weird this was.

“Damn Laville...! How could they stoop so low...?!”

“We’ll never forgive you...! Never...!”

Their minds had become imprisoned by hate. Hearts flooded with rage.

The leaders’ reactions were delayed compared to the audience, but finally they spoke up.

“Is he serious...?!”

“Oh my...”

“Hee-hee-hee! What a marvelous surprise!”

“.....”

Few expressed shock or disgust. Others giggled or elected to remain silent.

Pope Lizer looked our way. His eyes settled on me first...as if to ask me something. I simply glared at him.

Then he turned his attention to Ireena.

“.....!” She practically jumped out of her skin when he fixed his eyes on her.

When she reacted like a shy maiden, Lizer’s eyes oozed cruelty...and then he raised his voice to appeal to his people.

“I believe we ought to show forgiveness to Laville. The responsibility falls on the responsible individual. The nation need not suffer. This begins and ends the inquisition.”

A hush fell over the crowd. Lizer went on indifferently as if reading off a

sentence.

“Queen of the Laville Empire of Sorcery, Rosa von Volg de Laville, shall receive capital punishment. Furthermore...the Heroic Baron, Weiss Litz de Olhyde, and his daughter, Ireena Litz de Olhyde, shall receive the same sentence. Only through death will the sins of Laville be absolved.”

Upon hearing His Eminence’s judgment, the crowd broke their silence.

“Kill them! Do it now!”

“Ack! Repulsive creatures...!”

“Destroy their dirty blood! Tear apart the descendants of the Evil Gods—limb from limb!”

The crowd was going berserk, attacking Ireena with their words.

“Eek...?!”

Hatred appeared to fan through the crowd. It seemed she was dealt some psychic damage...beyond description.

Nevertheless, there was no time to contemplate her feelings or cheer her up.

“My knights. Capture the daughter of the Evil Gods,” Lizer ordered.

The Holy Knights moved in unison.

“A-agh...!” Ireena couldn’t do anything but cower in fear as they drew ever closer.

“Do not fear. I am by your side.”

I, Ard Meteor, had a duty to protect her. I faced the approaching knights and took a bold step forward toward the most immediate target.

“A mage who can’t use magic? You’re as good as done!”

“...Yes, well, I wonder,” I replied, avoiding his double-edged blade.

My opponent lacked real skill. His movements were careless, driven by scorn.

His eyes peeked out from his helmet, signaling that I didn’t stand a chance against heavily armored knights.

“Good grief.”

So maybe it was a challenge to fight full-plated knights without magic. But even armor had its weaknesses. For example...the eye slits.

As I dodged the enemy's second wave of attacks, rummaging through my breast pocket and producing a fountain pen, I launched off the ground, and...

"Excuse me."

I jabbed the pen into the slit.

"GAH?!"

As I anticipated, the pen seemed to gouge out his eye. He dropped the double-edged blade as he writhed in agony.

"Allow me to borrow your fine weapon." I collected the sword by the hilt and casually swung it down on the groaning knight before me.

Full armor had one more weak point: the joints.

The chainmail prevented a clean slice, of course, but...it wasn't enough to dull the impact.

"Blergh?!"

I struck all the joints, hard, crushing bone.

One down.

"Tch! You cocky brat!"

A knight thrust his sword from the side. I dodged this and aimed for the same spots as the last one.

Two down.

"I'll be borrowing this." I equipped myself with his sword and gripped one weapon in each hand. Now I could work twice as fast.

"Surround him! Corner and crush him!"

Casting aside their pride, my foes turned to full-on offense. I had to give it to them: They were well trained...but it all felt like play to me. A herd of cats couldn't outmatch a lion. Each time I showed off one of my many sword techniques, another knight fell to his knees.

I wasn't stupid enough to hype myself up and eliminate them all. If I did that, even Lizer himself would decide to join the melee.

"...Now appears to be as good a time as any."

After taking down another knight, I launched one of the swords in my hand at Lizer.

Naturally, it didn't even graze him. However, I had succeeded in distracting him for a moment.

"Ireena, hide."

"Ard...?" She was still shell-shocked.

I wrapped an arm around her waist, using the other arm to fling my remaining sword at an incoming knight. I once again dug my hand through my breast pocket.

"Ireena, please close your eyes. You must not look until I say so."

You could never be too careful. I quickly took out the item I had prepared for times like these...a white ball the size of my palm, known as a flash bomb.

"Well then, I bid you good day," I said, striking it to the ground.

The white ball exploded upon impact—bursting into a blinding light that spanned a wide range.

"Rah?!"

"It's so bright...!"

"Hee-hee-hee! Someone came well prepared!"

This flash bomb was originally created for adventurers to use against monsters, but its effectiveness in human battles was immediate.

"Hang on. It might get rocky," I warned.

".....!"

As the citizens raised their voices, I clutched Ireena's slim body and bounded away at the speed of light.

.....

...I was starting to pant, but I prevented myself from gasping for air. I wouldn't be caught dead making a mistake by being too loud.

"Shit! Find them! They couldn't have gotten far!"

The knights' angry roars moved farther away. We were safe for the time being.

...As soon as I jumped off the stage with Ireena in my arms, I slipped through the town while the frenzied mob was preoccupied by the blast.

We were holding our breath in the alleyway of a certain sector. I had come across this spot by chance while we were investigating the serial murders. The entire place was like a complex maze. A perfect place to hide away.

"*Phew*. It seems we have lost them." I tried to catch my breath, looking up at the sky.

It was clear and blue.

I hated how bright the sun was.

"...I have to do something." A voice piped up right next to me. Sitting on the ground, Ireena hung her head. "I have to help Rosie...!"

Her bloodshot eyes turned to me.

"Sir Ard Meteor. Lady Ireena Litz de Olhyde."

We were unsettled by the unexpected voice. I immediately glowered at it and prepared for battle.

My foe was a young girl. However, it was obvious she was no ordinary child.

"Oh, you're finally serious. I guess it's only going to get harder to escape from here." I smiled, demonstrating that I was ready to fight.

In return...the girl shook her head. "I am not your enemy. I am part of the Queen's Shadow."

"The Queen's Shadow."

A secret organization that served the queen. They specifically carried out her dirtiest and most difficult tasks. Ireena and I were technically members of the group...so if this girl was being honest, that made her one of us.

Again, *if* this was true.

“...What proof can you give us that you aren’t lying?”

“None. However, I’d like you to trust me,” she said with somewhat vacant eyes.

“I will help you escape. That’s why I’m here.”



Religion anchors the heart. In fact, many are saved by their faith. It can be useful for keeping public order.

At the same time...religion can sometimes give birth to madness.

“My goodness. Faith comes with pros and cons,” murmured Rosa, Queen of Laville, in the cathedral’s cramped dungeon. “It gives people a fixed standard of values...which means it encourages them to reject anything else... Without religion, Ireena could have existed without fear.”

Rosa looked up at the ceiling as she sat against the wall on the cold stone ground. “...I do wonder if those two will properly heed my words.”

Her eyes narrowed with melancholy as she imagined where they might be at that very moment.

As long as Ard Meteor was with her, Ireena’s safety was guaranteed. They were surely meeting up with the personnel she’d readied ahead of time.

The problem was what came afterward.

“...For better or worse, neither prioritizes their own welfare. There is a high possibility they shall disregard my careful arrangements. My friends can be so difficult.” She sighed.

Click, clack. The sound of feet echoed through the dungeon.

“A visitor?” She turned toward the iron lattice. Sure enough, someone was standing there. “...Ah, Valdr. Thou dost not appear so well.”

The loyal retainer’s countenance seemed withered, dry. The change was drastic despite the fact that not even an hour had passed since Rosa was arrested by the Holy Knights and thrown into this very dungeon.

“I must admit, that does worry me. It would be quite awkward for thee to die of old age after I am executed. It is thy skill that shall keep the nation stable after my passing.” Rosa chuckled as if this was a normal conversation. It was as if she was visiting with her grandfather.

However, Valdr said nothing. His sunken eyes were a ghostly sight as he continued to stare at Rosa.

Finally...his lips trembling, Valdr spoke.

“Why...?! Why couldn’t you just stick to the plan as discussed...?!”

Fat tears rolled down his cheeks. Rosa felt a tinge of guilt at the sight of her faithful retainer...but there was something confident in her reply.

“When I think of my subjects...it feels like my chest is getting crushed. Nevertheless, I feel not the slightest regret. I could never yield to the pope’s threats and betray those I love. Even if...blameless citizens fall victim as a result.”

She was having flashbacks of the past—thinking back on what had happened when Ard was on his school trip.

Pope Lizer had traveled incognito and shown up at the palace without warning.

“Cooperate with me if you do not wish for your secrets to be divulged,” he had said.

The meeting of the Five Powers and the peace treaty...were a front of some sort. She didn’t know the details. Lizer simply threatened Rosa and used her as a pawn.

He had just one demand: She had to promise to reveal Ireena’s true identity to the people and eliminate her during the ceremony.

“Then I shall absolve you of your sins and guarantee the peace of Laville. However, if you refuse—”

He had left that part unsaid.

Her life had been a living hell ever since. She could either make the choice as a politician or a single girl. She spent those days balancing the scales, but they

always came out even.

Rosa's final decision was obvious, seeing her present situation.

"Well, 'tis a saving grace that thou did not divulge the truth of the royal family. Had that been the case, it would have been checkmate."

She was not true royalty; Ireena was. As the descendant of the Evil Gods, she was the real ruler of Laville. If this became public knowledge, and the matter went south, the nation would experience a mass exodus. This was just another symptom of faith: No one wanted to live in a land ruled by the offspring of evil monsters.

"Upon further consideration, one might say we're making the best of the worst. After all, I am just a standin. I can be replaced as many times as needed —"

"Don't be stupid!"

Rosa's eyes shot open wide at his furious outburst. The old retainer glared back with a dark scowl. It was just like...a grandfather scolding his grandchild.

"Maybe you serve as a body double. However...to me, it is you, my lady, who is the true ruler! You cannot be replaced!" He gripped the iron bars, grinding his teeth as he glowered at Rosa. His bloodshot eyes were terrifying...but they seemed to have some warmth to them.

"...Hee-hee. I wonder when was the last time thou rebuked me so harshly."

Her life was a shadow of the real monarch, but she hadn't a single complaint. It was all because of this faithful vassal who remained forever by her side. However...

"I've betrayed you and, in the end, failed to answer your expectations... But allow me to be selfish and say my piece," she began.

Valdr continued to stare at Rosa as she uttered the final wish that she'd been carrying her whole life.

"After I die, do not allow anyone to approach Laville's most secluded region. I have prepared a safe haven for my friends there... Please, I beg of you."

The retainer said nothing. His silent eyes grew wide for a moment...and his

entire body began to tremble. Valdr closed his eyes and left the dungeon without answering Rosa's plea.

"...Will my hopes be answered, I wonder?"

Everything would be decided by a single person.

Fate hung on Ard Meteor.

"Don't mess this up."

As his image floated in her mind, the captured queen sighed once again.



She came to help us escape, according to this member of the Queen's Shadow, but we were skeptical.

"...What should we do, Ard?"

"Good question." I put my hand to my chin as my mind raced. "Have you prepared a safe house?"

"Of course. We shall hide you there before discussing the plan further."

"I see. Well then, lead the way."

These alleyways were ideal for hiding, but the enemy would find us in hours. There were many things I wanted to confirm, so I decided to trust this person and follow along.

We held our breath as we slipped through some backstreets, crawled through sewers, and finally arrived at the safe house. A completely nondescript house in a nook of Megatholium had been prepared. We entered, and the girl spoke as soon as we made it into the living room.

"We will make our escape at midnight. As for the gatekeeper, we'll—"

"We need no explanation of our escape route. We have no intention of leaving Megatholium until we have accomplished what we must. Isn't that right, Ireena?"

"Bingo!"

"...And what must you accomplish?" asked the girl.

“Do I need to spell it out? We are going to rescue Her Majesty the Queen,” I announced.

“We won’t leave without her! We aren’t going anywhere until then!”

The girl showed no reaction about this. Her response was flat. “That will be an issue. I have been given orders that must be executed.”

“Oh, come on! Work with us here!”

The Queen’s Shadow stared blankly at Ireena. I observed her with a cold stare.

“If we do as we wish, you will be forced to resort to violence,” I explained. “And...it won’t be easy to stop us.”

“I’m well aware. Even if I try to make you listen via brute force, we’ll risk wasting time and energy—and hindering the plan... Therefore, my hands are tied.”

“No. There is something you can do. You can provide us with information.”

“Like what?”

“As someone who works undercover, you’ve investigated a number of matters, I imagine. I’m certain you know what I am looking for. If you give it to us...I shall put it to good use.”

“How so?”

“To save the queen and leave this country with our heads held high. That’s our ideal goal.”

“...Impossible. Keep dreaming,” she mumbled, sounding tired before giving a deep sigh. “The entire city of Megatholium is currently shrouded in an anti-magic barrier. Therefore, we can’t use it—and neither can they. This battle will be decided by the quantity of available weapons.”

“Indeed. Ireena and I are up against...ten thousand.”

“Yes. Even for you—”

“We’ll show ‘em who’s boss!” Ireena narrowed her eyes threateningly. “Don’t you go underestimating Ard! Ten thousand Holy Knights? Might as well be ants

to Ard! He'll clean 'em up in a split second...Like: *Bam!* All done!"

The girl sighed as Ireena stomped on the floor. She didn't seem to have the least bit of faith in us, but oh well. As long as she gave us the key information, that was good enough.

"Let's start with...the time and date of Her Majesty's execution and the location. That kind of thing. If you aid us, then I will overcome our present situation."

It came as no surprise that she still seemed doubtful...but she was at least willing to talk. Rosa's public execution would be the following morning in the central plaza.

"Hmm. Tomorrow morning? I see."

"E-everything will turn out fine, right?!"

"Yes, I expect no problems whatsoever."

...I knew it. Lizer was doing *just what I thought he would*. I knew his motive. He was only after me, Ard Meteor... Well, I guess he was after the Demon Lord Varvatos. That must have been why he was buying me more time—time for me to come to a decision.

...And this was just as much of a trial for Ireena as it was for me.

...After that, the Queen's Shadow did her best to persuade us, but we stubbornly refused to listen...or go along with her escape plan.

We knew that because we could hear the bell ring across the town. If we'd done things her way, we would have been heading toward the sewers at the evening bell. However, Ireena and I were currently in a room of the safe house impatiently waiting for morning.

"...Ireena, you ought to sleep for a little bit."

"Yeah, I know. But...I guess I'm just too nervous to sleep." Ireena's entire body had been trembling for some time as she lay stretched out across the bed. "Hey, what about you, Ard? Aren't you gonna sleep?"

"I'll be fine. I can go for three days with no water, food, or sleep. Besides...as I mentioned before, there are *things I must do*."

In fact, I was doing those things at that very moment. I appeared to be doing nothing more than having a conversation on the surface, but my mind was turning.

I assumed this would be a late-night operation. However, Ireena had no obligation to come along. In fact, she might get in the way during the decisive battle in the morning if she didn't get proper rest.

...Nonetheless, I doubted she'd get a wink of sleep tonight. Her body was still shaking like a leaf in the wind. She had said it was from excitement...but reality said otherwise.

In that moment, she seemed crushed by fear.

...A short silence settled over the room. A true silence. There wasn't a sound to be heard. It was as if the entire world stood still.

It felt like it continued for an eternity...until it was broken an instant later. Ireena's voice called out.

"I wonder if Daddy is okay," she wondered quietly as a seed of worry escaped her lips.

"Weiss is the Heroic Baron. I'm certain my parents will be by his side. There is nothing to fear."

"...Yeah, you're right."

Even though she agreed, it seemed the concern in her large eyes was growing more prominent. This silence was wreaking havoc on her mental state. It forced her to face the truth—whether she wanted to or not. It made her think...about the future.

"...I wonder what'll happen from now on. What am I supposed to do?"

This verbalized everything that was on her mind. We would save the queen, escape the city...and then what?

Return to Laville? Back to the royal capital of Dycaeus? Back to the Academy?

"Who would even want to see my face...?"

I didn't see any place for her.

The citizens of Megatholium weren't the only ones who knew her true identity. The entire continent had been made aware of this devastating truth. From the speed with which the news had traveled...Lizer must have preemptively spread the information soon after we left our capital.

He had exposed and propagated her secret.

"Sylphy...sees the Evil Gods as a sworn enemy...and Ginny thinks their descendants are monsters..."

There was nothing left to dispel Ireena's negativity.

I was in the same position. I wanted to say something to her but couldn't. I felt so spineless.

"They all...think I'm..."

That burst the dam containing her emotions. Tears cascaded down her face and wet the sheets.

Everything had come crashing down—the trust, the friendships, all of it.

People feared the unknown. Now that they found out her secret lineage as a descendant of the Evil Gods, her former friends would detest her. Ireena was certain of this.

...I couldn't say she was wrong. That was why I had *chosen this future*.

"I wonder if...Mr. Bordeaux felt this way...when he died..."

He was a man with faith in people and love for humanity, trying to find his place among them. However, their betrayal sent him spiraling into despair, and he chose his own death.

People would not allow someone so strange to exist.

People would never love someone who was beyond the norm.

People...must have been disgusting creatures, according to Lizer's theory.

"N-ngh...!" Ireena faced the wall and stifled a cry, refusing to show me her crying face.

...It seemed like her heart might break at any moment.

“Ireena, I...”

With my sobbing friend right there before me, I couldn’t help but call out to her...but I got choked up.

Ireena, I’m by your side. You’ll always have me.

...I was disgusted with myself for trying to say the words I *planned to say all along*.

“I’m with you?” “There’s no need to fear?”

Whose fault do you think this is?

...Mine. I’m to blame.

I took away Ireena’s home to save myself.

“I...”

I knew. I understood Lizer’s plan as soon as Bordeaux died. I could have put a stop to his plans if I wanted to at that moment. I could have prevented this entire situation.

But I didn’t.

Because...I was scared.

In my current form, I would have had to battle Lizer by weaponizing my full strength to take him down and end this whole tragedy before it started. Then I wouldn’t be watching Ireena cry right now. But in exchange...Ireena would fear and reject me.

...To save Ireena from the White Dragon—Elzard, the Frenzied King of Dragons—I unleashed 30 percent of my true powers...and...

That had petrified her, even though it was just for a second.

In the end, the scales tipped over to affection, which was how we were still friends.

However...if I gave my all, there was no question she would become horrified of my true form.

After all, I...the one who called himself Ard Meteor...

...was Varvatos the Demon Lord—the most irregular entity of them all.

Even though we're talking about Ireena here, that didn't change the fact that she was a person. Humanity will never accept the odd one out.

...I wanted to believe in her, of course. But I couldn't. Because I didn't want her to reject me, I put Ireena at a disadvantage...making me the only real winner in all this. That was the choice I made. In the end, Ireena would lose her friends and her home, leaving her with sorrow.

And what about me? I lost nothing.

Since no one knew my true identity, I could keep all my relationships.

After we saved Rosa, I'd hide away Ireena and Weiss in a remote corner of Laville, go to school, hang out with friends on occasion, and stop by her place for a friendly chat. I'd live my life and somehow create a world that could accept Ireena. Even if it took some time, I knew I could do it.

Call it a distant dream. That was what I'd chosen. I had believed it to be the right decision.

...I thought back on my earlier conversation with Lizer.

"We ought to scorn those who use others and ruin lives for their own gain."

"Yes, I must agree. However...do keep in mind that those words reflect on you as well."

...He hit the nail on the head. I'd been trying to justify my decision. I'd told myself that everyone would be happy in the end. That it was the best thing I could hope to do.

...How the hell could it be the "best" option?

How could it be the case if I was seeing Ireena in this way?

It couldn't be right. You couldn't call this perfect.

...I could never be like Lydia because I was selfish. Maybe it was why I was never loved like her.

"What...do I do now...?" Ireena sobbed, quivering.

Seeing her had made me finally realize where I went wrong. I shouldn't have

let my narcissism take hold of me. I should have...sacrificed myself and saved my friend. That's what Lydia would have done.

...I couldn't turn back time. I couldn't take back my mistakes.

But...there was probably still time. I could fix everything and save the friend before me.

“...Do not worry, Ireena. I will take care of everything. I will return your home to you.”

Even if it meant losing my own place in this world, I had to see this through.

Ready to carry out my decision, I balled my hand into a fist.

CHAPTER 68

The Ex-Demon Lord and the Bright Side of Humanity, Part II

Under normal circumstances, it was no easy feat to condemn and execute royalty or a national leader. This was particularly the case if a given country was an absolute monarchy. Even in the democratic or socialist nations that protected the rights of the people, it was hard to actually set up a trial.

Back to the case of an absolute monarchy. The ruler only saw the chopping block upon a successful revolution... In a democracy, the trial could take forever as they collected evidence and prosecuted royalty—and they might not even find them guilty in an impeachment trial.

At any rate, it took time and energy to eliminate someone with social significance from society.

However...a papal inquisition largely bypassed all the usual channels. As leader of the United Creed, His Eminence's words were law, and it was his duty to safeguard the world order in accordance to doctrine.

Since Lizer Bellphoenix was essentially the ruler of all humanity, it was understood that good and evil were his to decide. If he held an inquisition, the people would accept any outcome. It didn't matter if the one on trial was a slave or the ruler of a nation. If His Eminence sentenced someone to capital punishment, he would follow through with no room for argument. That was the unbreakable command he had over his world.

And so...Valdr, the prime minister of Laville, was currently experiencing the worst form of agony.

Early morning. There wasn't a cloud in the pale-blue sky. The sun filtered down on the earth. The temperature was neither hot nor cold. It was the perfect morning.

Under the sky, the public execution of Rosa, Queen of Laville, was being

carried out.

Accompanied by Holy Knights, she trekked down the main avenue, slowly. She had taken on the appearance of a sinner—stripped of any attire befitting a ruler, donning the tatters of a prisoner. The golden hair that went down to her waist seemed dirty without any trace of its silken beauty.

At the end of the road, citizens awaited her procession...and cursed her out.

“Demonic minion!”

“Burn in hell!”

“How could you shelter enemies of the Great Demon Lord?! You should be ashamed!”

They didn’t just stop with seething glares and verbal abuse. Some of them pelted her with stones, laughing scornfully.

Even as blood trickled from the sharp stones that sliced her arms, legs, and head, Rosa stood proudly and continued to look forward. She faced the final stage set in the central plaza with those burning eyes.

It was a large trapezoidal platform with long stairs leading up to it. It had just hosted the peace treaty ceremony the day before.

“Hee-hee. Constructed to welcome peace, now serving as a place of judgment. How amusing.” Rosa laughed away the collective jeers as she ascended the stairs.

Prime Minister Valdr watched on with fear.

On the surface, he was a defender of societal justice who despised the criminal queen. On the inside...he was a loyal servant who wanted to cry out.

Why? Why is this happening to her...?!

They had forced her into tattered rags. The people were trying to stone her.

She was starting to bruise and bleed as she approached.

Valdr wanted to bite off his own tongue. Either that or...tear all the perpetrators of violence limb from limb. He was in a living hell.

Even so...his cruel assignment was just getting started.

The queen stepped on her place of execution. This was where the pope would read off sentencing at this point and denounce the offender.

However, the pope was nowhere to be seen. Only an archbishop stood in his place.

The prime minister didn't know why. He didn't want to find out. However, he *did* know this was a true nightmare...for it was Valdr himself who would have to take on the pope's duties throughout this process.

Rosa in her current position meant Valdr was the ruler of their nation. As such, he had to protect the country—even if it meant blaming Rosa for everything, forcing her to bear the people's hatred, and meting out punishment.

It was the only way they could keep Laville safe.

"Come, Sir Valdr. Right this way."

The archbishop handed him a single sheepskin parchment. Valdr stood in front of Rosa as he held the record of her crimes.

"...Do not falter. Proceed as thou must," she whispered.

He bit his lip, and a moment later...Valdr took the parchment in both hands and held it aloft as he read.

"Hear ye, Rosa von Volg de Laville! You have betrayed the Demon Lord, despite claiming to follow his ways! Your sins are too appalling to say aloud! There is no suitable punishment left besides death! Once thy soul passes on, it shall fall into the bowels of the earth and suffer in the eternal torment of holy flames!"

He was starting to feel sick. He wanted to disparage this stupid letter and rip it to shreds.

Valdr did his best to control these violent urges, skin beading with sweat as he made Rosa kneel before him.

"...Don't mess up. I hate pain," Rosa said, presenting her neck with a smile.

"Prime Minister. Here is your instrument."

A Holy Knight standing nearby held out a double-edged sword.

The death sentence of this inquisition would be carried out by this black sword. The lethal instrument was made in the image of the sword the Demon Lord once wielded. The Evil Gods and demons whose heads fell to its blade only experienced a lifetime of torture in hell. For believers of the United Creed, such punishment was to be avoided at all costs.

“Go on, Prime Minister. Bring the hammer of justice down upon the criminal.”

At the archbishop’s insistence, Valdr held the sword above his head as he took ragged breaths.

“Haaah...! Haaah...!”

Drenched with sweat under the clear-blue sky, he looked down at Rosa. His hands seemed to shake as he gripped the sword hilt.

“Ggh...! Ugh...!”

He grunted involuntarily. For Valdr, Rosa’s death marked the end of his own life.

Maybe that was why visions of the past flashed through his mind like a flood.

He had watched over her since she was a baby. He vividly remembered her ascension ceremony after the previous ruler had passed on. Her dignified demeanor was more than just a standing, and her wisdom was unrivaled. She was noble, fair, and beautiful in both heart and mind. He believed from the very bottom of his heart that no greater monarch had ever been born. He wasn’t lying to her when he expressed that in the dungeon.

Valdr’s true ruler was Rosa and no other.

...Could he slay her by his own hand?

“Ggh...! Nghhh...!”

He couldn’t do it. There was no way he could go through with this.

“...Prime Minister. Thou dost not want to commit treason, correct?”

Treason?

Treason?

Valdr let out a sharp breath.

Treason meant turning one's back on their ruler. For Valdr, Rosa was the only one who fit that role. The pope couldn't hope to come close to her authority over him.

"I...!"

Two emotions were at war within him.

Loyalty and love for his queen.

Loyalty and love for his country.

Because he felt them both from the heart, he writhed in mental anguish, unable to reach a decision.

I must slay her for the sake of the nation... I had an entire night to steel myself...!



Old Valdr, the good and faithful servant.

The man, so experienced in the ways of the world, started to weep like a child.

Someone...! Anyone...!

The tears dripped down his face, wetting the back of Rosa's neck.

Help...! Someone...! Save her...!

When was the last time he had prayed? He had always been so certain that all hardships in this world could only be overcome through his own volition.

He prayed to the heavens like a helpless infant.

Anyone...! Help me. I'm begging you, please, he pleaded from the bottom of his heart.

There was a blast in the distance. Smoke billowed in the air.

This incident triggered mass panic.

"What was that?!"

"I-I'll go check...!"

Up on the execution platform, the archbishop and Holy Knights were in a frenzy.

"Gah?! A-another explosion...?!"

"It's the Demon Lord! The prisoner must have incurred his wrath!"

Below the platform, the public was expressing open terror. Meanwhile, there was a chain reaction of explosions, which were...getting closer.

"Sigh. Dear me. Is this what it's come to?" Rosa sighed as she looked off into the distance. "What an egregious misstep. I had given clear instructions to leave me behind. They understand nothing."

A stern condemnation, but her face looked somewhat pleased. Rosa was thinking about a particular pair...which was a thought that Prime Minister Valdr shared.

Then, the old retainer focused on one person in particular.

He despised this person. He could hardly stand to stomach the individual who was a poor match for someone of his master's esteem. Valdr would not be swayed on this matter.

However...there was only one individual who could save them from this predicament.

Valdr went against his principles, hid his embarrassment, and called out a certain name imploringly.

"Ard...Meteor...!"



The Queen's Shadow had researched one matter in particular for us while preparations for the execution were still underway.

The position of the Holy Knights.

They seemed to be concentrated in a spiral around the execution platform in the central plaza. The formation was an impregnable fortress. Not even a single ant could get through their configuration.

The girl had declared, "*Stealth will not be enough.*"

For her, there was only one option if we wished to save the queen: Sneak toward the platform, manage to slip through the knights, and rescue Rosa. From there, we'd escape through an underground pathway. If that method was impossible, she thought that meant we were completely screwed.

"*So what will you do?*" she'd asked just as Ireena and I were about to leave the house and advance.

My reply?

"*Nothing at all. All we have to do is pick up Her Majesty in broad daylight.*"

It was moments before Rosa's head hit the ground...

Ireena and I were parading boldly down the main avenue.

Since all the citizens were gathered around the platform, the town looked practically deserted. It was just me, Ireena, and...

"Hmph...! Stop, you two!"

...the Holy Knights on patrol.

One of the units noticed our presence and barked out in warning.

“It’s them...!”

“You’re under arrest!”

“They just waltzed right in...! Are they out of their minds...?!”

The unit of Holy Knights whipped themselves into a frenzy. One called out to another who appeared to be the captain.

“Should we call for backup?!”

“...There’s no need. We can handle this,” he assured, unsheathing the sword at his side. Following his example, the others simultaneously drew theirs.

“I bet you’ve gone bad, because you have some nerve strolling on these streets with no magic,” the captain scoffed, charging forward, and the rest of the Holy Knights hit the ground running.

“Capture them dead or alive! Show no mercy!”

“For His Eminence!!”

“RAAAAAAH!”

I watched the men barrel toward us. “I’m unable to use magic with this barrier in effect. It seems like an unconditional rule...but...”

My voice was flat as the corner of my mouth twitched.

“Demon Lord knows that rules are made to be broken.”

I thrust my right palm out toward my foes. They couldn’t have guessed what was coming for them.

“What the hell is that going to do?!”

“This.”

An instant later, a crimson geometric pattern flashed in front of my right palm.

It was...magic.

“What?!”

In front of the Holy Knights was the impossible.

“I believe I should blow you all away. *Wind Slash.*”

A violent gust whipped around me, knocking the knights away with a loud roar. I could see they were shell-shocked as they were blasted away on impact.

How’s this even possible?

He shouldn’t be able to use magic.

They couldn’t say that out loud, of course.

I broke out in a grin. “As I said before, rules are made to be broken. Maybe it’s better if I say—”

“Ard Meteor makes the laws of the universe!” Ireena interrupted.

I smiled at her. “Well then, should we clear the way?”

“Yes sir!” She nodded violently. I responded in kind.

We launched ourselves off the ground, sprinting through the main drag as fast as the wind. The other knight units took notice obviously, but...

“Gaaaaaaaaah?!”

“B-backup! We need backup!”

They met the same fate as the group we had just taken care of.

Every time we would advance, we would be discovered by the enemy, whom we would annihilate to make progress once again.

“How the hell can they use magic?!”

“Shit! Call the elite forces! They’ll be able to use—Gah?!”

We took down each unit one by one, and they all said the same thing: “*How can they use magic?*”

The trick was pretty simple.

If I couldn’t use magic, all I needed to do was set the right conditions to allow it to happen.

Anti-magic techniques basically targeted a fixed area and sealed any use of spells within that range...which was a form of magic in itself.

That being the case, I took to my skills to analyze and control the spell. That way, I could overwrite it with one that allowed only Ireena and me to use magic. I was up late the previous night finding out everything I needed to know.

...If it had been crafted by any old magic user, I would have been done in seconds, but this one looked to be the work of a Heavenly King.

Lizer's anti-magic barrier was rooted in the city itself. The entire holy nation of Megatholium was under one big spell. I realized this when we took in the entire city before the big incident.

There was something calculated about the shape and position of the buildings: The entire town was laid out like a magic circle.

This must have been Lizer's design. It must have come to him before he even founded this nation.

...The man was as wily as ever. Even so, it wasn't like it couldn't be cracked. I wasn't worried about that...

In fact, my anxieties were directed elsewhere at the moment...

"Ha-ha! Come at us! We aren't scared of no Holy Knights!"

Namely, the mental state of my dear friend, Ireena.

She sported a warlike smile as she scattered the enemy...which wasn't like her at all.

Staying true to her beliefs while going easy on her enemy was the Ireena way. But right now, there wasn't an ounce of mercy left in her heart.

"Take that! There's more where that came from!"

She mercilessly debilitated her targets, unleashing a stream of magic. If she didn't focus on the battle in front of us, I was certain her heart would break.

There was no doubt about it. Ireena was desperate. She had lost everything and was now giving into despair.

...But I couldn't say anything to her. This was fine. We'd keep pushing forward

and take out anyone in our way. Then...I'd sacrifice myself and save Ireena.

"Hah! Done already?! You guys are nothing!"

"...Don't let down your guard. They're quick to provide reinforcements. That is proof we are nearing our goal. From here on, our enemy will be fighting to the death."

"No sweat! I'll blast 'em all away!"

Ireena remained true to her word. She hammered the enemy with magic without regard for her physical health. Her eyes began to flood with tears, and her pearly whites set into a snarl.

The platform was a stone's throw away...

"They're here! The elite troops! The elite troops are here!!"

"Nice!"

The knights surged with excitement.

"...Hmph. The elite forces, huh?" I was thinking of Lizer's army from my past life.

Sure enough...the gang looked just like them.

"...?! What's with these guys...?! They creep me out...!" Ireena said gruffly as a frown creased across her brow.

Our new opponents—these elite troops—were a cut above the rest.

First of all, they were equipped differently. Their armor was bulkier than the average Holy Knight, and the blades were golden. You could tell they were skilled with a single glance.

But more than anything...

"I saw those gleaming blue eyes and seals carved into their chests. I knew the elite force had been enhanced."

The irises of the knights were washed in blue glitter. They didn't seem human. A peculiar symbol glowed on their chests.

This had to be Lizer's doing. If I had to name this unusual power, I'd call it

Override Control.

“Gaaaaaaaaaaaaaargh!”

Charging forward, the knights held their large unsheathed swords high over their heads, ready to swing down.

Their target was Ireena—not that she was slow enough to let them touch her. She flung herself out of the way, blasting them with magic in return.

“Mega Flare!”

A raging ball crashed into the enemy. The fiery heat only got their armor, but that must have made it hell on their skin inside. Even with psychic strength, there was no way they could continue the battle.

...Or so one would think.

“Gaaaaaaah!”

“—gh?!”

The solider didn’t lose his intent to continue this battle, plunging his blade with a piercing shriek.

“Wh-what is up with this loser...?! ”

“He’s not the only one.”

I faced the other elite knights as they closed in and hit them with random attack spells. Some got fire. Others got wind blades. Others were struck by clods of earth. Any normal person would have been down for the count.

“Grah-gah! Ge-hee-hee-hee-hee-hee!”

“Gah-rah! Gah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

They got back up and kept right on fighting.

...This was Lizer’s special power. The power of Override Control. When he cast *Buff*, it gave birth to an unusual phenomenon.

One of them...was insanity.

While in effect, it induced a mental breakdown, turning the target into a doll who could only do Lizer’s bidding and nothing else. That explained why the

knights soldiered on, even when they were in critical condition. If ordered to fight until they won, they'd try to tear the enemy's throat out even if they lost everything from the head down.

Lizer had used to lead those new-and-improved forces out on the battlefield... to take down the Gods by combining his own powers with strengths of other people.

"Oh dear. I guess we're in a pickle."

I was aware that these knights were superpowered. If we wanted to take them down...we couldn't afford to hold back.

"...This is a lot sooner than I expected."

I thought I had a little more time. I *wanted* more time. I wanted to stay Ireena's friend for even a second longer.

But we were out of time.

"Rosa's head will be severed if I dally here. It looks like this is it," I mumbled to myself.

I flashed Ireena a look. Even though she appeared petrified of the enemy, she was still facing them with a brave face.

...I wished I could see her smile one last time, but I was out of options.

I knew I would have to unleash my full power. I would throw away my identity as Ard Meteor.

All roads lead to despair.

I began to chant for the ace up my sleeve, my original technique. This time, there would be no holding back. I'd bring out my full power.

I would let the world know of the second coming of the Demon Lord.

I had no other choice. I would save Ireena, who had nothing left...and I would offer myself in exchange. It was the only path I could take. It was the only route I *should* go down.

"...Good-bye, Ireena," I said, offering quiet words of parting.

The chanting went unheard. I cast aside all doubt...

“RAAAAAAAAAAAH!!”

Before I could resume, I heard a familiar voice boom from the heavens. A girl had launched herself in front of me. Her crimson hair whipped around as she alighted and swung down her large sword on the elite forces.

“Grah?!” One knight gave a small cry as his helmet split open and fell.

“Heh-heh! Not to worry! Just blunt force with the dull side of my blade!” the girl announced, flashing her canines.

“S-Sylphy...?!” Ireena stared at her in wonder.

“Oh, please. The dull side? Your blade is double-sided! There’s no dull side, making your statement implausible, Miss Sylphy,” someone admonished.

“Don’t sweat the details! Read the room!” Sylphy waved her sword.

Coming up behind her, another girl looked beat.

I knew who that was.

“Ginny...?” My eyes grew as round as Ireena’s.

...Impossible. There was no way they could be here. Even if they used the quickest form of transportation, it would take a few days to get to Megatholium. This whole ordeal would have been over by the time they arrived.

...Ginny must have read my mind.

“Lady Verda paid a visit and informed us of your situation,” she explained. “She lent us her teleportation machine to get here as fast as possible.”

“So we took her up on her offer and whizzed over here!”

...In that case, it wasn’t so strange that they got here in time.

So that solved the logistical question.

But why...? Why did they come running?

They must have known the truth about Ireena. Then why were they here?

...It seemed Ireena was struggling the hardest with this question.

“Wh-why? Why did you...?!”

“Hmm? Why? What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I—I... I’m a descendent of the Evil Gods... Sylphy... W-wouldn’t that mean I’m your nemesis...?”

Why come to the rescue of your mortal enemy?

Ireena looked at her, terrified of hearing the answer. Sylphy cocked her head like she was out of her mind.

“So? What’s the correlation here? It doesn’t matter to me whether you’re a descendent of the Evil Gods. I care about—”

Sylphy shouldered her sword.

“Gi-gi-gi-gi-gi! Gaaaaaaaah!” The elite force lowered their guard, coming in from all sides.

“Hey! I’m talking here!”

“I’m right behind you, Miss Sylphy!”

Sylphy brandished her sword with marked annoyance. Ginny thrust her spear nimbly.

The redhead’s special weapon was Demise-Argis, the holy sword. Anti-magic effects didn’t work on this legendary weapon. Ginny’s spear was no different. Her leather armor and blade were sorcerer’s equipment from the ancient era—pieces that I’d loaned to her. The inherent power in their armaments ensured they were operable even in a space that sealed away magic. Basically, between the two of them, they were as strong as an entire army.



“Like I was saying!” Sylphy shouted. “I don’t care if you’re a descendant of Evil Gods! I care about how you make me feel—how at ease I feel by your side!”

She took down one or two more knights during her speech.

“And I’m so comfortable next to you! You make me feel like I belong! It’s the only place where I have a sense of security in the modern world! I’m gonna protect you! I’m not gonna let anyone lay a hand on you!” Sylphy shouted in a show of intense emotion.

Ireena’s lips trembled. “Sylphy...!” Her eyes began to run over with tears.

“Blast ooooff.”

“Detonaaate.”

Two soft voices overlapped and became one...and a storm ravaged the area, carrying off half of the elite forces.

It wasn’t the work of magic—but a power of the ancient past.

I knew who possessed these abilities.

“Lumi, Lami...!”

The former spirit twins looked down on us from the roof of a nearby building, flashing toothy grins and waving at me.

“Daddy!”

“We’ve come to the rescue!”

“I-I’m here, too...!” added another familiar voice.

Purple lightning flashed across the sky, weaving a spiderweb that struck the elite knights. This could be considered a form of magic...but it wasn’t woven from runes. Overriding the anti-magic barrier was...a spell crafted in the demon language.

“Carmilla...!”

The caster was a young demon with ashen skin and pure-white hair.

“Why are you here...?” I found myself asking.

Carmilla conjured more spells, barking back at me. “Isn’t it obvious...?! To

save our friends...!”

Friends, huh. Even after you know the truth?

“Basically. Oh, but Miss Ireena, don’t get it twisted: *I’m* here to assist Ard. I could care less about you. It’s nothing against your Evil Gods heritage. I wouldn’t care if you had the worst secrets in the world—”

“Ginny...”

“Nothing would make me hate you more than I already do! I never liked you anyway! Hee-hee-hee.” She gave a wicked grin and made no effort to mask her true feelings.

Ireena’s entire body shook with rage. “Hmph! Well! That makes two of us!”

Contrary to her barbed words, she was wearing a heartfelt smile, tears wet on her cheeks.

“And I’ll have you know! I don’t need your help! Ard and I are the dream team! We never asked for your support!”

Mean words coated in love. Ginny giggled.

“Hee-hee. It seems you’re back to your usual self. That is the Miss Ireena I know. You’re no tragic heroine. You look much better screeching like a little monkey.”

“Who do you think you’re calling a monkey?!”

“Oh, cut it out. Go on. Aren’t you trying to save Her Majesty? Take special care not to get in Ard’s way,” Ginny warned.

“As if I need you to tell me that! You donkey!”

Ireena grabbed my hand and yanked me forward upon concluding their usual catfight. I raced ahead as she pulled me along.

“Go get ’em!”

“Well, if Ard is with her, I doubt they’ll run into any issues.”

“See you later, Daddy!”

“We’ll take care of things here!”

“I...can be helpful...too...!”

Warmth spread in my chest as I listened to the voices behind me.

I realized I had stopped mid-chant and was no longer trying to activate my trump card.

“Hey, Ard.” As she gripped my hand, Ireena smiled softly at me.

“If I’m being honest, I didn’t believe in anyone. I was sure they would all reject me... I guess I’m stupid,” she admitted, wiping tears from the corners of her eyes. “I didn’t lose anything...! I’m so mad at myself for doubting them...!”

Her expression was clear and bright—as if washing away her sorrow from the previous night. No trace of the violent facade from the fight lingered on her face. Now, she seemed brimming with hope, vitality, and courage.

“I thought they were all...”

Ireena’s words burned through me.

Ah. I see.

“Gaaaaah!”

My thoughts were interrupted by a ferocious roar. It was dripping with an intent to murder that made our skin crawl.

I grabbed Ireena by her delicate waist and launched ourselves to the side. Seconds later, a pillar of ice pierced the spot we’d just been standing on.

Apparently, the anti-magic seal had been lifted. When I looked in the direction of the attack, I found several elite knights. I frowned at the furious beasts before us.

“...It seems things may get tricky from here on out.”

These forces already had unusual endurance and strength. If magic was thrown into the mix...you might say they made the world’s best foot soldiers.

But even though we were up against that...Ireena roared back at them.

“Hah! These guys are nothing!”

Where was her despair from earlier? The only emotion in her face was pure

courage.

“Bring it on! There’s no way I’ll lose...to the likes of you!”

I could feel some type of aura coming off every inch of Ireena’s body. It was like her feelings had been converted into energy.

“Haaaaaaaah!”

“Graaaaaaar!”

The herd of special forces came at us with a mighty roar. The battle was about to begin— “Don’t just stand there.”

A single beast person stood before us in the shadows. She placed her hand on the hilt of the sword at her side.

“Hah!”

She unsheathed her sword with a sharp cry. Her movements were so fluid, a sight to be seen. In under a second, her blade had come down more than a thousand times. I saw light flashing, and each of the knights’ armor was split in two.

“...Relax, I used the dull side of my sword.”

She really did...unlike a certain idiot. The blue light faded from the enemy’s eyes as they hit the ground.

There was only one woman who could pull off this amazing feat...

“L-Lady Olivia...!” Ireena gasped.

That’s right. It was my big sister, Olivia vel Vine herself. She sighed and put away her sword before turning toward us.

“...Hmph. Looks like I was right.” Olivia glared at me, knitting her brows. “You got a stupid idea stuck in your head, planning to go through with your senseless plan... I can’t even stand looking at you right now, Ard Meteor.”

Her eyes seemed to read my every emotion... She must have come *because* she understood everything...and knew she could stop her stupid *little brother* from running wild.

“I bet you were thinking of sacrificing yourself to save your friend, huh?

Hmph. Every time you screw up, you keep begging for more. You've *always* been a slow learner." Olivia shrugged. "And who's going to be rescued by your desperate act of martyrdom, huh? I mean, who even needs saving? Hell, if anything...the only one who needs saving is you, Ard Meteor."

I imagined Ireena was confused, seeing as she was standing there mute for a while now. Who could blame her? Olivia wasn't talking to her close friend. Olivia...was basically scolding her annoying *little brother*.

"I imagine Lizer tricked his people. I bet they do his bidding. Ugh, that damn idiot. He's too smart for his own good. He can't let loose. Did he forget his old friend told him life was easier to live as carefree as Sylphy...?"

Lydia had told him that a long time ago.

She continued. "The world works in simple ways. Simpler than you'd think. I mean, look around you. *Everyone* serves as proof."

There was something profound in her statement.

"Target sighted!"

"W-wait...! Isn't that Lady Olivia...?!"

"Has she arrived to help us...?!"

The fresh supply of knights pressed forward in droves. They were all perplexed by Olivia's presence.

"Don't get the wrong idea. I'm only here to lead my stupid students. I don't give a crap about you guys."

Her bold declaration really threw them for a loop.

"If you want to arrest them, go for it. However—I can't say *everyone* is gonna be on board." Olivia heaved out another sigh.

An unforeseen group of intruders appeared.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

"We must protect Ireeeeeeeena!"

"Show 'em what we got! Those long hours of training weren't for nothing! Ireena Defense Force, attaaaaaaaack!"

I saw all the boys in our class.

“Siiiiir Ard!”

“We’re here on behalf of Captain Ginny...to open the waaaaaaay!”

“Your harem is on the line here!”

Then I witnessed a group of all the girls in our class.

“Take this! *Lightning Shot!*”

Among them was...a blond girl launching attack magic—our classmate and the daughter of a duke, Veronica.

“Heh-heh! Booyah! First kill!” Veronica pumped her fist when it hit one of the knights.

That signaled the beginning of the real battle.

“Lead the way, Veronicaaaaa!”

“The Holy Knights are going doooown!”

“Marry me, Sir Aaaaard!”

A ferocious exchange of magic commenced. The knights let out a war cry that traveled down the main avenue, which had turned into a battlefield.

“You fools! Don’t you know what you’re doing?!”

“Siding with a descendant of the Evil Gods even though you are followers of the United Creed! Blasphemy!”

“We won’t show mercy just because you’re kids!”

The students weren’t the least bit daunted, proceeding to throw it right back at the knights.

“Shut it, assholes!”

“The United Creed, jerk wads? We’re zealots who worship Ireena, our real-life angel!”

“You expect us to give a damn about some Great Demon Lord we’ve never even seen or met?!”

“Isn’t life all about looking at hot girls?”

“I was saved by her presence! Ireena forever! Ireena! You’re the best!”

...Ireena and I were creeped out by the deep bellows from some of the guys.

“Hee-hee...!” Ireena finally let out a boisterous laugh as she watched them go all out for her. “Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Lady Olivia was right! No one needed any saving! I’m so happy with my life!”

Ireena’s whole face seemed to glow as she beamed at us.

“Whoa! Ireena is smiling!”

“Sir Ard! Please show us yours!”

“We don’t deserve it yet! That’s why he still looks so surly!”

“Ah, but even seeing his unimpressed face...is kind of addictive...!”

As they pushed back on the knights, our classmates seemed to let loose their strangest fantasies.

...Now that I surveyed the battlefield, I discovered our classmates weren’t the only ones fighting. There were students from other classes, and I was surprised to see even our nemesis class from the school festival joining in.

Whoa. Why did they show up?

“Ard Meteooooor! How are you feeling, asshole?! How does it feel to be saved by the underdogs?”

“We won’t lose to the likes of you!”

“Don’t get cocky just ’cause you got lucky once!”

They were really getting to me.

These people were my former enemies, haters, and people who should have been disillusioned by me when they found out the truth.

They were now all fighting to help me.

“Quit slacking and get a load of this! *Giga Flare!*”

An instant later, a fiery spire rose in the middle of the knights’ forces. The boy who took out more than half their numbers in a single attack looked over at me.

“Well, it’s not the same as the *real deal*...but cut me some slack,” he said, scratching his head awkwardly.

“E-Elrado?!” Ireena said, snapping her eyes open.

Elrado. The husky boy was among a large group of students.

“Even you...? Why?”

“Ah, how do I say this? I guess I owe you one? I was shitty toward you when we first met. I apologized to Ard at the school festival, right? So uh...I’m real sorry about before, Ireena.”

“What? Oh, don’t worry about it. I’m already over it.”

This was Ireena’s first time seeing his transformation, so it was only natural she’d be thrown off her game. Even I was the same way at the school festival.

...Elrado had no shortage of bombshells, it seemed.

“Yeah, uh, so. How do I put this? Well. I’ve been through it... And I’ve been thinking about you a lot, Ard... Not that I’m in love with you. Got that? It’s just...I was maaaaybe hoping we could be friends, since we’re so similar.”

Elrado’s eyes darted around as he broke into a cold sweat. “Forget it! Anyway! Now that you’ve got someone like me here, there isn’t anything to worry about! I’m outta here! Back to the battle!”

He forcefully cut off the conversation and jumped right back into the maelstrom.

“I-I’m kinda blown away right now. I think that might make it into the top three plot twists in my entire life,” Ireena said.

“...Seriously.”

I realized I had made a mistake. When I beat Elrado in the duel, I’d thought I could never be friends with that guy.

At the time, Elrado had discovered my power...and that obliterated his psyche.

He’d looked at me like...he was confronting the unknown, like he was cowering in front of an awful monster. I was convinced any chance of friendship

with Elrado was long gone.

Well, I guess I'd decided that for us.

I had projected my own opinions on him—because humanity feared the unknown and refused to take us in. I'd thought everyone would push me away when they discovered the real me.

But I guess...I was wrong. Even if it left him shell-shocked to unveil my true identity...it seemed people could come around after healing their wounds...and accept what was different.

"Hmph. Looks like you finally get it."

"L-Lady Olivia..."

She came out of nowhere and peered at me with her arms crossed. "People are ugly. Sometimes, that's all we can see. But...that's not the sum of who they are. You understand that now, right?"

"...Yes."

I had been mistaken, fixating on the wrong path. How could I make the right choice when my vision was so narrow?

Maybe now...that I could see the right route...with the help of everyone else.

"Be responsibly stupid. Like Sylphy...and Lydia. Be dumb and believe in people, Ard Meteor. Those in *this* world will never betray you."

I nodded very, very, very hard.

"If you get it, then hurry up and go. Get out there and do what you need to do."

I obeyed my big sister and raced forward with Ireena.

"...Who would want to *reunite* with the real you after you only revealed yourself out of desperation?"

I chose not to hear the miffed voice and instead sprinted down the main road with gratitude toward my big sister.

Ireena and I arrived at the central plaza.

“Eek?!”

“It’s a pawn of the demons!”

“What are the knights doing?! H-hurry up and kill the monster!”

I couldn’t have cared less about the citizens’ jeers now. Neither did Ireena. In a sense, we had both become different people. We knew the dark side of humanity. We were more than familiar with its repulsiveness and selfishness.

However...that didn’t define them.

“Let’s go, Ireena.”

“Right! Hang on, Rosie!”

Bring on the taunts. I accepted their hatred, rushing forward with honest hearts.

Straight toward that long stretch of stairs.

We scattered the enemy.

“Your Majesty. We’ve come for you.”

“You don’t have to worry, Rosie! You’re safe now that we’re here!”

We had...arrived at our destination.

“*Sigh*. Goodness. I guess my wishes have not been upheld. My act has been all for naught... Well, I suppose ’tis for the better. This is apparent as I now look upon thy countenance.”

On her knees, Rosa smiled at us, looking pleased, even though she had just barely escaped execution.

“Ard Meteor! Ireena Litz de Olhyde! You are the most treacherous of traitors in the history of our nation! I, Prime Minister Valdr, shall bring the hammer of justice down upon you!” The veteran vassal shouted, glaring at us with bloodshot eyes.

...He couldn’t fool me. It was obviously all an act.

“Raaaaaah!” He rushed forward, black sword in hand.

It was just an act to protect the nation. And naturally...I was going to play

along.

“It’s laughable to think you can exterminate evil with your sense of justice.”

“I will make your blood turn to rust on my swooord!”

He had the right spirit, but to be honest, his swordplay needed work.

His downward swing slogged through the air. I dodged it with ease and stepped forward.

Then I punched Valdr in the gut.

“Gweh?! How regrettable...! Archbishop... P-please, I leave the rest to you...”
He continued his theatrics and fell to the ground.

However, he whispered in my ear on his way down. “I leave Her Majesty to you...!”

His voice was empty of any deceit. I was silent in crying out *Leave it to me.*

“N-ngh...! R-rotten traitors!”

A man in the prime of his life, the archbishop began chanting. I had no reason to sit there and wait for him to finish.

“Lightning Shot.”

“PGWAH?!”

My electric attack jolted the upper half of his body, and his eyes rolled back. He had fainted on the spot. There was no one left to stop us.

“Looks like this case is closed! Okay, Rosie, let’s head on home! With everyone!”

“Indeed... Hey, Valdr. Thou art awake, right? Hey. I’m not going to carry thee. Hey. Hey. Wake up.” The queen prodded his ribs with her foot.

Valdr seemed to be enjoying it somehow.

“Hmph. At any rate, it is as Ireena has said—”

Case closed.

...As if it would be so easy.

Nesting in my heart space is white darkness.

Someone started to raise their voice without warning.

Born, only to be shunned.

Live, only to be nothing.

Judging that this world lacks meaning.

Never to doubt my convictions.

That austere, baritone voice could only be his. And he...was casting a spell that only he could use.

But now...the white darkness has been dispelled.

And my heart burns bright.

Ireena, Rosa, and I all looked around in search of the enemy. But upon failing to find him...

I am a shield.

I am a fortress.

I am a cornerstone.

I am the protector of all light that has value.

I put considerable distance between myself and the others...

Yes.

That is my identity.

“—gh!! Up there!”

My head snapped up toward the heavens where I saw him, coming toward us with a heart brimming with fierce conviction.

A blank space who perished at his post—Cloverfield.

—Lizer Bellphoenix was on his way.

CHAPTER 69

The Ex-Demon Lord and the Bright Side of Humanity, Part III

A man plunged down from the center of the blue sky, his papal robe whipping around in the wind. His eyes saw only me. Mine saw solely him.

Lizer Bellphoenix.

An experienced and fearless fighter.

A veteran soldier skilled in the pen and the sword.

The shrewdest military mind.

One of my former greatest soldiers.

A cornerstone of the Four Heavenly Kings.

He came at me, exerting tremendous force—all to take control of my fate.

“Lizer...!”

An instant was all it took for me to construct a spell as I glared at the enemy descending straight down on me. It was seven layers of the high-level *Giga Wall*. For this first bout, I chose to focus solely on defense instead of intercepting him with attack magic.

If he was any normal enemy, this would pose no threat to me, and I would respond with a counterattack to nullify its effects.

However...with Lizer casting his *Original* technique, there would be no intercepting it.

He was holding that giant mace of his, manifested from spell. Making contact meant it was all over.

“Hah!” Lizer barked.

The distance between us was infinitesimally close to none. He wielded the enormous mace in his left hand, aimed straight for my head. My defense

managed to block it, the golden barrier stopping the heavy impact, which set off a thunderous shock wave that rattled our ears.

Moments later...my wall started to crack.

I guess I should have expected this of Lizer. He nearly obliterated my defense magic in a single attack.

I could have restored it—if Lizer had been kind enough to let me.

“KAH!”

Lizer swept his mace sideways with another mighty shout. My wall didn't have the strength to withstand another attack. As soon as I made this calculation, I disposed of my barrier, hitting the ground running to dodge his blow.

The mace whistled through the air, and I bounded back.

A successful withdrawal.

I vaulted into the sky from the execution platform, shooting forward like an arrow, far away from Ireena, Rosa, and Valdr.

As the citizens below looked up at me...Lizer stepped forward and launched himself at me.

We ripped through the air, landing in the backstreets of town. Without anyone else around, it was just us two. Lizer glared at me as he shouldered his mace. I could feel that the old general was out to kill me. He radiated murder.

I continued to keep a strict eye on him as I murmured quietly, “Is this the sort of scenario you were anticipating?”

“...Not at all.”

There was no remorse in his expression.

“You are awfully calm,” I observed.

“That is because it does not alter what I must do.”

We continued to lock eyes as we talked. The vibe made our hairs stand on end.

Lizer continued. “If things had gone as I expected, you would have tossed away this ‘Ard Meteor’ facade. You would have plunged into darkness to save your friend...by returning to this world as the Demon Lord. That was what I expected.”

“...I knew it. You were aware of my identity all along.”

There was no longer any need to pretend in front of this guy. I faced the man before me not as Ard Meteor, but as Varvatos.

“I see you’re as sharp as ever. I was *this* close to messing up and playing right into your hand,” I admitted.

I must have been dancing to the sound of his tune all along. Ireena has lost everything because I’d made a selfish decision. I was so close to revealing myself to the world...if it meant saving her...

“If it’s for Ireena, I’d adopt a new set of values and morals. I’d do whatever it took... But I didn’t think about the future on purpose. I knew a wretched one was waiting for me. With no place to go, I’d either chose to take my own life... or...”

“Brainwash the citizens, following your own footsteps from the ancient days. It would make things easier for you... I was hoping that would be your decision.”

He must have realized that would never happen. In fact, it wasn’t even an option for me.

“I’ve had more than enough of that...after making that choice in my final days,” I admitted. “It was too upsetting to rip away free will from my subjects and force them to look at me with affection—a solitary game.”

I was painfully aware of that.

“...Lizer, I’ll be honest. You made some points with your vision for society. But using power to control people’s minds and force them into living in a utopia is —”

“I know. You just said it yourself. A lonely game. But...that was the only way it could be actualized. I, Lizer Bellphoenix, exist only to bring that ideal to fruition.”

“...And anything outside your faith lacks worth?”

“Correct. I will unite the world as one, wipe away all discrimination, and create a world where children can smile. A world where it doesn’t matter if one is demon or otherwise, where the young ones can live happily. This body is nothing more than a vessel toward that end.”

In a way, his convictions...reminded me of my past self.

“...I used to be a lot like you. Especially in those final days. After losing Lydia, I thought I was only living to keep my promise to her.”

“I know. Lady Lydia always hoped for a world without...discrimination, disparity, or war, a world without sexism and ageism, a world without boundaries between demons and humanity. A world where everyone could smile and laugh. It was very close to my own vision of utopia, and your version was perfect.”

“Yeah. I made it happen...only after brainwashing the citizens, getting rid of anyone in my way, and ridding the world of any free will.”

In the ancient world, I was always fighting for freedom and to gain the respect of the people.

But at the very end, I took away that exact freedom from them.

“The irony. After crushing the Evil Gods—my eternal enemies—I ended up doing their job for them.”

Many of my subjects became disillusioned by this change and left me. Some even fanned the flames of rebellion.

...With my own two hands, I murdered them all—the subordinates who had believed in me and stayed by my side all that time.

In order to keep my promise with a dead friend, I slaughtered. I killed. I butchered them.

“In the ancient days, I would sometimes think I wanted to be defeated... Then maybe everything would end. Maybe I could end a life where I was constantly feared by others. Maybe I could break away the chains that bound me toward this way of life.”

I had wanted someone to stop me—keep me from making all these mistakes. In the end, I was never offered that respite...

I finished my temporary utopia, and soon after...my heart had shattered into a million pieces.

“...I got what I deserved. I knew that, but I couldn’t handle being alone.”

“And thus you abandoned your utopia and reincarnated into this era... And you know the rest: I talked about what happened after your selfish choices at the museum.” Lizer’s eyes seemed disapproving. “Modern society is in shambles. People are breaking apart. Nations are falling to pieces. War is a daily part of life, and the lives of precious children are being lost. All by the will of the people. Even I cannot stop their collective choice. That’s why...I need you.”

Lizer hefted the giant mace off his shoulder and pointed it at me.

“I shall use my power to make the Demon Lord my pawn. By doing so, I shall give birth to a new utopia in the modern era.”

“...I don’t think that’s much of a utopia. It’d be a kingdom of dolls.”

“It matters not. Humanity will walk the wrong path unless someone controls it. Even you must know this. It must have been proven to you in Megatholium.”

He was indirectly referring to Bordeaux. It was true that his death had shaken my perspective.

“Your little scheme made me think people were disgusting...but it’s different now.”

This was my counterargument.

“Bordeaux was unhappy because he couldn’t find a real friendship. He was called the Saint and saved many. But...he had built hierarchical relationships, not friendships.”

Everyone had called him the Saint out of reverence like some sort of living god.

It reminded me of my former relationship with my subjects. As the Demon Lord, I was feared by my subjects, who put me on a pedestal as the savior of the world. In other words...they saw me for my tremendous power. They didn’t see

me as an individual.

All of Bordeaux's relationships were the same.

"You have to be on the same level to develop real friendship. Bordeaux must not have realized that until right before his death. If he had, he wouldn't have chosen that end for himself..."

He could have struck up a real friendship with Ireena and me. With that as a stepping stone, maybe he would have enjoyed a life surrounded by loved ones.

Just like Carmilla, the demon in our class.

"...What are you trying to say?" Lizer asked, sounding irritated.

"Bordeaux's death triggered my misguided way of thinking...and I made the wrong choices. Until recently, I...couldn't refute anything you said, Lizer. I thought humans were pathetic, too, but...

"...But?" the old general asked, his eyes narrowing to scrutinize me.

In the face of this, I thrust my chest out proudly as I made my declaration.

"I can now say this with confidence: People aren't *just* those characteristics. There's the tiniest speck of goodness in all that grime. Call it human potential. I believe in it. So...Lizer Bellphoenix. I won't support your vision."

I was just like Lizer until only recently, but this was where we parted ways.

People feared the unknown.

People would never welcome these individuals as one of them.

...That was a downright lie. My friends proved it to me. All the people in this life were living proof.

"...You think they might be friends, but that's an optical illusion. A trick of the eye," Lizer said. "As I said, that won't change my objective. It alters nothing—even if circumstances are not optimal, even if you have made an error in judgment. I will use you by my own power...and create a bright future for the children."

His entire body started to exude murder and militancy.

Words were no longer necessary. From here on out, we'd be using only brute

force to hammer our convictions into each other.

All roads lead to despair.

That is the way of life for a pitiful man.

I prepared to cast my greatest spell. If I was going up against an opponent like Lizer, there was no way I could afford to hold back.

In complete solitude is he.

For there are those who follow his lead

But none to rule together with him.

“As if I’d let you cast your special magic...!” With a sharp exhale, Lizer swung his own weapon.

Its target was...not me.

It was two stray dogs who had been listening to our conversation in a nook of the street. Lizer mercilessly struck both in the back.

““YIP?!”” The two dogs yowled, crouching to the ground to deal with their injuries.

““AWOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!””

They seemed to shake it off, howling viciously. Their eyes shone crimson, and a red symbol glowed on their chests. This was what happened to living organisms when Lizer struck them with his mace after he had cast his special skill.

“Grah!”

The effect was absolutely incredible.

The two dogs bared their fangs, lunging to attack me, moving at supersonic speed. A moment ago, they had been ordinary strays. Now, they possessed astounding fighting power and were closing in on me to carry out their master’s orders.

There is not one who understands.

All are eager to leave his side.

I continued my chant while avoiding the beasts' fierce attack. I wouldn't be able to cast unique powers if I couldn't finish the aria, and using any other magic while chanting wasn't possible, either. That was why I usually prepared it before the battle to cast as a surprise attack.

Lizer was doing his best to make me struggle.

"Nragh!!"

While my attention had been taken by the dogs, Lizer came in from the side to knock me down. I leaped away just in time and put distance between us.

...His unique power didn't just make anyone struck by his mace insanely powerful. It could also make the target his puppet. The worst part was...it was *infectious*.

Cast away by his one and only friend.

He sinks into a sea of madness and isolation.

In the middle of my chant, one of the dogs leaped out at me from a blind spot. I dodged it by a hair's breadth. Its fang attack thwarted, the dog glared at a third stray...and rushed forward to sink its teeth in the quivering animal's throat.

"YOWL?!" The dog whined in pain.

"GRAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAGH!"

The next moment, the wounded animal looked up at the sky as it howled. Its eyes shone red, just like the new symbol on its chest.

...This was probably the greatest weapon in his arsenal. Any living creature that came in contact with one of his possessed puppets would be infected with the same condition.

In summary...

If the mace touched you, it was game over.

If you touched something that had touched the mace, you were done for.

This was why it was impossible for an army to defeat Lizer in battle. After all, he could make any of the enemy soldiers follow his orders.

...I was being outnumbered. He was driving me into a corner. The battle could end at any second.

Rest without peace.

Drown in anguish and despair.

That was as far as he was going to get.

That which guides this tale.

The chant was done.

Private Kingdom—the Story of a Lonely King.

That marked the beginning of my revenge.

A dark aura twisted around my right arm, manifesting into a chain. The darkness morphed into a large black sword...and I gripped its hilt with my right hand.

“““GRAAGH!”””

The three strays closed in.

They were innocent.

“I’ll end you.”

The dogs swooped down on me. As I was now, they were fatally slow. To me, they might as well have been frozen in midair.

It didn’t even take a full breath for me to slice through their torsos. Their corpses thudded on the ground, with no energy to offer one final yelp of agony.

By the time their blood and entrails splashed on the ground...I was already closing in on Lizer.

“To return your gift. Hope you like it.”

With no trace of former melancholy, I swung the dark blade—the vicious attack aimed at the nape of his neck. Lizer blocked it with his mace.

However...he had no chance of holding out against my physical strength.

“Ngh...!” he growled, anguish showing on his stony face.

His body was blown away to the side. Although he'd been able to defend against the first blow, his stamina had given out, and Lizer blasted through multiple edifices from the impact.

I was now on the offensive. I was the superior opponent.

I passed through the holes left behind his body and searched for my prey.

I felt a tinge of anxiety.

...It wasn't part of Lizer's plan for me to feel like I was close to winning... right?!

I had sent Lizer flying toward the main avenue.

"Y-Your Eminence?! What happened?!"

...On the long strip was a large group of Holy Knights...

"Huh?! S-Sir Ard?!"

"Why did you come back?! Where's Ireena?!"

...There were my classmates.

"...Hmm. Call this divine aid," someone said—in a voice that was calm, level... and icy.

Crap.

Lizer's mace moved...right toward the heads of the male students next to him.

"Stop, Lizer!!" I stepped forward to put an end to this reckless act.

But just before I could...

The wind kicked up. The air whistled.

Someone had swooped in like a gale with a blade drawn.

"I'll take down anyone who lays a hand on my students...!"

My big sister's sword blocked Lizer's weapon.

Metal grinded against metal, whining and showering them with sparks.

The boys...were perfectly fine.

"L-L-L-Lady Olivia...!"

“Run! Get as far from here as you can!”

“I won’t let you. Don’t allow a single one to escape.”

Two sides with conflicting commands. They stood locked in. The knights quickly blocked off all exits. Olivia clicked her tongue and stared at her former comrade-in-arms.

“Damn you...! I held my tongue because we broke bread together, but...! If you’re going to get my students involved, I’ll show no mercy...!”

“Show no mercy, you say? And what of it? Olivia vel Vine. Do you believe that I would be brought down by a heathen?”

The murderous energy flashed between the two, rippling through the air.

Sure enough, the winner of this deadlock was...

“Comrade. I remember fighting beside this sword...but it’s grown pitifully dull now that you have lost sight of your reason to fight.”

“N-ngh...!”

The old general put more weight into this attack.

“Ngah!”

His strength sent Olivia and her sword flying. As soon as there was considerable distance between them, Lizer struck a group of nearby soldiers with his mace.

“Olivia vel Vine. As you are now, you aren’t even worthy to die by my hand.”

The enhanced soldiers personified Lizer’s orders.

“““GAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!””””

With a strange war cry, three knights charged at Olivia.

Lizer seemed to imply his subordinates were enough for her. As a matter of fact, his power had made them a force to be reckoned with...

“Tch...! Ard Meteor! Protect the students!” Olivia barked, slowly drawing the enemy farther away.

I took over this duty and headed for the students.

“Worry not. I won’t let anyone lay a single finger on you.”

Their reactions were mixed. Some showed relief. Others were angry and seemed to think I was disrespecting them. Still others never fully grasped the situation in the first place.

At any rate, a vicious battle was about to unfold. I had to take down Lizer and protect everyone at the same time.

So what to do?

I mustered up all my wisdom and started to work out a plan.

Meanwhile...

“You’re right. My subordinates and I will not lay a finger on anyone. In fact, it is no longer necessary.”

Lizer’s expression was somewhere around a self-satisfied look of victory.

What was he talking about? I had no idea.

A second passed by.

“U...ugh...!”

I heard a tiny voice from behind. The high pitch told me it was a girl, and her urgency gave me the chills.

This was *not* good.

My sixth sense kicked in, warning me of danger. I instinctively looked back.

“What...the...?”

A female student stood before me. Her eyes glowed a fiery crimson, and a symbol of the same color was on her chest. Her fingertips...reached out to touch the nape of my neck.

“Ngh...!”

Those strengthened by Lizer’s magic became his puppets. Furthermore, anyone touched by his pawns lost their sense of self and became his subordinates.

I was no exception.

“Tch...! How did this...?!”

My vision blurred, flooding red. A small emblem bubbled up on my chest and swelled bigger. I could feel my consciousness falling under someone else’s control.

“...I told a single lie as I was speaking with you just now.” Lizer was starting to dive into some lengthy explanation.

“Remember when I said our present situation was unprecedented? That was not true. I foresaw this might happen and created a bit of artifice. Be that as it may, it was a risky feat.”

Lizer looked up at the sky with a fresh face. “I readied one of your schoolmates in advance, the female student over there. I secretly came into contact with her and placed her under my command with my special magic. I doubt you picked up on this, but after thousands of years, I’ve gained a new ability. That is...the power to invoke potency at will. Now I can decide how my magic will affect those who have been struck by my mace.”

So that was how he made this all happen. Until just moments ago, the girl had been in her right mind. She hadn’t been acting the least bit strange. However, that must have just been on the surface.

The girl had become Lizer’s pawn...all without realizing it.

“As I mentioned earlier, it was a dangerous scheme. Originally, I considered naturally leading you here after you had already cast your specialized magic. However...seeing as you are so perceptive, I knew you might realize my intentions. Even so...it appears I am under the protection of some form of greater will.”

As he said, I would have sensed something if he had led me here, but...

“I did not bring you to this place. You did. You unconsciously dug your own grave.”

That was why I hadn’t noticed his plan.

“An aid from above. A higher power had chosen me. After this tragic drama spanning thousands of years, I will use this moment to bring about the final

curtain. With you as my pawn, I shall open the door to a new world.”

“N-ngh...!”

A bloodred crimson invaded my vision. The symbol on my chest started to spread.

“As my former master, I offer you the smallest tribute. I shall provide aid to your friends. There is no need to worry. You may submit your consciousness over to me.”

He was talking as if he’d already won and...I laughed it off, breaking out in a cold sweat.

“Not yet. There’s no way in hell this is over, Lizer.”

“It is. At this point in time, you have no options left.”

“So what...? Even you know I’ve got some strange powers...!”

As part of my *Original* technique, I could analyze and control spells. If I could just activate that power— “Impossible. Didn’t you used to tell me? Your ability is ineffective against other people’s special talents and skills. They cannot be analyzed or controlled.”

Lizer’s expression went dark, as if he was starting to doubt his certain victory.

I saw this, letting my lips curl into a smile. “Just like you lied to me...I lied to you...!”

I touched the design on my chest with my right hand.

“It’s too soon to celebrate, Lizer Bellphoenix...!”

Then, for the first time in my life...I controlled and analyzed a specialized skill—an *Original* technique.

...As mentioned, I didn’t tell Lizer the whole truth. In theory, my abilities could analyze and control all concepts.

However...these specialized skills housed so much information, it had the potential to overwhelm my brain...up until the point of madness. This had supported my theory that it was impossible.

If I couldn’t make it happen, I had no future. So I figured I might as well give it

a shot.

Steeling myself, I began to analyze his ultimate spell.

“G-gwah...! Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaagh!”

The maelstrom of information flooded my consciousness.

Meanwhile...the crimson blocking my vision subsided slightly, and the symbol on my chest seemed to wither.

“What...?!” Lizer shouted in dismay.

I imagined him blinking in surprise. I wished I could laugh at him, but...I was at capacity.

“Gngh. Ngagh...!”

The blood vessels started to pop. It felt like they were all being torn to shreds. I had experienced all sorts of pain in my long life...but nothing like this.

Magic subconsciously released from my body, becoming a shock wave that impacted the material world. It struck the students and knights, rippling through both their clothes and faces.

“I still...haven’t...processed enough...?!”

I needed to raise the limits.

“Phase II...!”

“UNDERSTOOD. SWITCHING TO STAGE II OF FULL-BODY TRANSFORMATION.”

Lydia’s robotic voice echoed in my mind. Without a moment’s delay, my body began to change.

My hair was dyed pure white, sweeping behind me... A dark aura ran down my neck and covered me all the way to my toes and morphed into pitch-black armor.

“N-NGAAAAAGH...!”

Each time I entered this form, it increased its potency of my skills. As proof, my processing capacity rose tenfold...while Lizer’s hold on me weakened.

There was hardly any crimson left in my vision, and the symbol on my chest was now diminutive.

“Ridiculous...!”

Now that I could intake more information, I’d gained at least a certain degree of leeway. I took this chance to look at Lizer and flash him a big smile.

“There’s nothing the Demon Lord can’t do...!”

As my body was washed over with energy, I continued my analysis.

Now that I was in this form, my processing skills were elevated. On the other hand, my body was involuntarily creating shock waves as I tried to handle this information. It was already starting to impact the physical world. Windows shattered to pieces. The ground broke apart...

It struck people’s minds and bodies.

“Gwagh?!”

“Wh-what is this...?!”

The knights cried out. Some fell on their backsides, others were blown away by the waves...and the remaining people tried to brace themselves as their entire bodies trembled.

As a whole, they all looked up at me in fear.

Meanwhile...the students were dead silent. They were behind me, so I couldn’t see them. However, I was sure— “I’m surprised. Your power is something to behold. Certainly not anything I could measure up to. You are the greatest...and most fearsome monster,” Lizer said glibly as he spread both arms wide.

I could see what he was up to. He was trying to shake me up psychologically, which would make me fail.

The reality was I did have cause for concern. Lizer was using that as his ace in the hole.

“Take a look around. They fear you. My subordinates...your classmates. All fear that tremendous power.”

“.....”

“You said people were more than hideous creatures. The very ones who you referred to are now treating you as a strange entity! They are in fear and awe of you!”

Lizer’s voice intensified.

“*This* is the will of the people! They fear what is different! They hate it. They would do everything in their power to eliminate it! Because you transcend all other beings, the whole of creation will reject you!! Even if you get through all this! The future waiting for you is—!”

He was now shouting.

“W-wow...!” gasped one of the students, and then it was like a dam burst. My classmates began to stir.

“I knew it! Sir Ard is the best!”

“So everything we’d seen before was just a warm-up...?!”

“Hah! So what?! Even if he’s the strongest one in the world, Ireena will marry *me*!”

“In your dreams. She’s *mine*. Dammit.”

“Sir Ard, marry meeeeeeeee! Like, right nooow!”

Absolutely no one feared me.

Like always, the girls were doting on me so much that it creeped me out...and the boys couldn’t stand me. Even after unleashing my power, it didn’t change their perception of me.

That was...how I had been hoping to be saved.

“How about that, Lizer Bellphoenix...?! The people I’ve met in this era...will never...betray me, Ard Meteor...!”

Lizer was stunned into silence, and I gave a mighty smile. “This world is a lot simpler than we thought, Lizer...! It’s true that people fear what they don’t understand, but...! No matter what secrets you may be hiding...! No one in this world would ever abandon their friends...!”

Up until this point, I'd failed to realize something so simple. I never could have believed it was that obvious. However, I didn't have reason to doubt this anymore. There was no mistake. I would prove that and resolve everything.

I further unleashed my power.

"Phase III...!"

"UNDERSTOOD. SWITCHING TO *STAGE III* OF FULL-BODY TRANSFORMATION."

As soon as Lydia's voice echoed in my mind—

My entire body was covered in a film of darkness. It must have looked like I was being wrapped in a cocoon.

Seconds later...I broke through it like an emerging insect.

"Huh...?"

"S-Sir Ard...?!"

The students cried out in astonishment. It was a normal reaction.

My body had undergone significant change within the black cocoon... It was like I'd become another person entirely.

I was cloaked, not in armor, but in what appeared to be a raiment of condensed darkness. My pure-white hair flowed down my back and shone against the sunlight.

I was...the one who carved his name into legend, Varvatos the Demon Lord.

"S-Sir Ard...! You're so beautiful...! Hmm? I'm feeling a little woozy..."

"I...might die...! He's too hot...! Death by hotness...!"

The girls swooned the moment they looked directly at me.

"N-no way...! As a parishioner at the Church of Ireena, I would never..."

"Wh-what's this throbbing in my chest...?!"

"If he's that hot, I don't even care if he's a guy."

As if to follow the steps of my former subordinates, some boys were learning they could swing both ways.

I really wished they'd all just cut it out.

...Their cheering washed over me.

"Hey. I've finished my analysis." I spoke with the same face and voice as my past self. The red in my vision and the symbol on my chest were completely gone.

I was controlling and analyzing a specialized power. My first-ever attempt was a success.

"Y-you...! You've got to be joking...!" Lizer exclaimed as he stared dumbfoundingly and broke into a cold sweat.

I readied my black sword. "...How about we finish this?" I declared in a quiet, calm voice. I stepped forward to get us started.

"—gh!"

As expected of a Heavenly King. He could react to my movements even in my third form.

"You might have fast reflexes, but they mean nothing."

I caught him in my strike zone and swung the black blade with ease.

Lizer stopped my slash attack with his mace.

"N-ngagh?!"

My physical strength at the start of the battle could not compare to what it was now. The moment sword and mace slammed together, and the impact rang through Lizer's body...

It pulverized every bone and tore his insides to shreds.

"GWAGH!"

He vomited blood, and like an arrow, his old body went flying straight through the center of town. Like a short while before, Lizer left wind tunnels through the buildings.

I kicked off the ground lightly and followed him.

"I'm about to slice you in half. Get ready, Lizer."

He was still airborne when I ran the blade through his torso.

“Grah!”

This time, he managed to react at the last minute. He held out the mace to protect his stomach.

Our weapons clashed once again. Because I focused my power directly below me, Lizer’s whole body slammed into the ground and pounded into the cobblestone road.



“GAH!”

Another spew of blood poured from his mouth, dyeing his white beard.

Lizer couldn't hope to beat me. Even still...there was not the slightest hint of resignation in those eyes.

“U-urawagh!”

Maybe conviction kept him moving. Every bone in his body was crushed, and his innards were all ruptured, yet Lizer resolutely swung his giant mace.

“It's useless.”

He was much too slow, and I dodged the attack with ease.

My target was my enemy's right arm—the one gripping the weapon. I drove my dark blade right at it.

When it made contact, Lizer's arm was lopped off.

“Gah?!”

The severed arm thudded to the ground and let go of the mace.

“You're done.”

After my brief verdict—I cast a binding spell, manifesting magic circles around Lizer.

A beat later, they released dark chains that snaked around the old soldier's body. Finally, the tips of the chains planted themselves into the ground and forcefully brought him to his knees.

I looked down on my past subordinate and readied my black blade.

“We may have gone our separate ways...but you're still a former servant who once attended to me. Therefore, I won't completely erase your astral spirit,” I continued quietly.

I'd already decided on Lizer's sentencing. Letting this man live was too dangerous.

“Any last words?”

Sweat trickled down Lizer's cheek, and his withered face was screwed up in

pain.

“My fate...is not destined to end here...!” His eyes burned with passion.

I admired the old man for refusing to show weakness even in his dying moments.

“You were a fine soldier. Farewell.”

I aimed for the top of his head and swung down.

This veteran fighter’s fate would be decided here. In just a second, my sword would split his body in two.

The time of deliverance had come—

“No. This isn’t how the story goes.”

There was no warning when I heard this voice.

The scene before me changed.

Before I knew it, my dark sword had disappeared...and Lizer. When I checked myself, I realized that I was no longer in my transformed state. Obviously, this was not my doing.

I didn’t have the slightest idea what was going on. But I did know one thing.

The person standing in front of me was the force that had made this all happen. Not only that, but I recognized this individual.

A slim figure dressed in a tailcoat, face hidden by a strange mask.

I knew this façade, though I didn’t know the person’s name.

I thought I’d personally taken care of this individual during the school festival...but here we were, with no explanation.

“So you’re alive,” I murmured. It was a natural response.

The mask chuckled as I stayed on guard and showed that I was ready to engage in battle.

“Indeed. That’s right. You’re right, Ard Meteor. I am now a clown. And clowns are eternal, indestructible beings,” the mask said with somewhat dramatic flair.

I ignored this statement. “...Where’s Lizer?”

“In a perfectly safe place, of course. The big bad Demon Lord would eventually gobble him up if he stayed close for too long. So I thought I might provide a replacement for the time being. Sir Lizer is still a key part of my plan, after all. I cannot allow you to kill him.”

“Plan? ...What is Lars al Ghul scheming?”

There was a high chance that this mask was one of the top brass of a certain organization.

That was why I had asked him this.

“Hmm. Could you say the organization is involved with my plans, I wonder? I’m not particularly trying to trick anyone. Clowns can be disagreeable at times. There’s little difference between laughter and anger. That’s where it gets tricky.”

Well, that wasn’t much of an answer.

The mask bowed elegantly. “Well then, let us meet again soon. Farewell, my beloved Demon Lord.”

They were gone an instant later.

“...Who and what the hell was that?”

Even after this individual was gone, I continued to stare at the single point right where the figure had been standing.

“Their appearance. Their aura. Even their voice. It all sounds so familiar. Like an old friend I used to know... But on the other hand, it feels like we only just met.”

Who was that person? What were they plotting?

...I knew I’d end up meeting them again at some point, even if I tried to fight against it. I bet it would cause the world to be in jeopardy...

“Ah! Heeey! Arrrrd!”

“Thou certainly know how to create a commotion.”

“Let’s get outta here!”

“I do wonder how much it will cost in damages...”

I had friends.

“Daddy!”

“I’m pooped!”

“I want to go home and roll around on my bed. You too, right, Carmilla?”

“Y-yes. I do.”

I had friends I could believe in and love from the bottom of my heart.

“Sir Ard has returned to normal!”

“You’re easier to befriend in this form.”

“Oh, thank god. I don’t feel anything for him at all now.”

“I knew it. Ireena’s the one for me.”

“Hey, where did Elrado and Lady Olivia go?”

“Oh, didn’t she say something about fixing his reclusive habits and chase after him?”

“Why would she do that?”

...As long as I had everyone by my side, I would try my best, no matter what life threw at me.

“That was a lotta hoopla! But Ard saved the day!”

I would do whatever it took to protect my best friend’s smile.

“Well! Let’s head on home, Ard!”

I gripped Ireena’s outstretched hand.

“Yes, let’s go home. To the place we belong.”

From the bottom of my heart...

...I savored this moment of happiness.

CHAPTER 70

The Ex-Demon Lord and the End of Life as He Knows It

A campaign only ends once you've returned home.

It was an old battle proverb that warned soldiers not to get too comfortable just because they had won. Our situation wasn't exactly a campaign...but well, the results were very similar. I would remain focused and vigilant of my surroundings until we arrived back home.

Fortunately, we were able to use Verda's small teleportation device and return to Laville without any further incident.

...And by some stroke of divine luck, it didn't break down and send us flying into the future.



It was safe to say that the incident at Megatholium healed some psychological traumas that Ireena and I had carried with us all our lives. However, little else was resolved by this event.

I'll jot down all the biggest developments here.

First, the continental peace treaty.

It was the reason behind our visit to Megatholium. However, it had been nothing more than Lizer's little excuse to lure me into his trap. Thinking back on his plans, it seems unlikely that he was ever hoping to go through with it.

At any rate, thanks to the mess in Megatholium, the peace treaty is no more. The citizens are bummed, and it hurts my heart to know it's my fault in a way.

Next, the situation in Laville.

As I mentioned earlier, we'd only gotten a chance to address some psychic damage dealt to Ireena and me. There was no way to solve the fact that classified information had reached the ears of the general public.

Weiss the Heroic Baron and his daughter, Ireena. The whole continent knows the damning information that they're descendants of the Evil Gods and that the palace was involved in their cover-up. I guess the only good thing was that no one knows they're the real royal family...but that puts Queen Rosa in a tough spot.

Many turned against her after the incident in Megatholium, and I knew it wasn't long before a rebellion would break out.

Since I'm the underlying cause of it all, I considered taking responsibility in some way, but...Olivia beat me to it.

By acting as a national adviser and advocating for Rosa, Ireena, and Weiss, she was able to quell the public. As a result, it was decided that governmental affairs would be jointly managed by Olivia and the royal family.

Even though Olivia has been living a quiet life as a teacher at the Academy, she's still a Legendary Apostle. The public has faith in her, and her actions have calmed the nation's fervor.

Last, I'll explain the state of affairs outside Laville and bring this journal entry to an end.

While we were frantically trying to calm our own uproar, a big problem had broken out across the rest of the continent. The holy nation of Megatholium called upon each nation to join them in an alliance against Laville. I hear Lizer is the leader and chairman, but...I doubt it's really him. It must be a substitute that masked figure set in place.

If they form this alliance, our country will be in jeopardy. Once that happens, Megatholium will declare war on us, and it'll only be a matter of time before they attack.

Many of the smaller nations have shown interest. They must have figured there was no way they could pass up a chance to tap into our land and resources.

As for the other Five Powers...

The Vyheim Empire was the first to react. Seeing as they've always detested the Evil Gods and demons, they must think our deeds are unforgivable.

For now, it looks like the neighboring Republic of Goldenia has expressed their sympathies. Our relationship with them is deteriorating. Even so, Buffer is an extremely cautious person. He's been looking at the situation with a sharp eye and keeping his position flexible.

That was when Olivia championed the royals, Ireena, and her father in front of everyone. After they decided to govern Laville together, Zelos, the president of the Federal States of Saphiria, offered to form a treaty with us.

To be more accurate, he offered it to Olivia, not Laville. He's a descendant of one of her relatives and a follower of the Black Wolf Order, which basically worships her.

Naturally, we accepted his proposal. Zelos came here to meet with Olivia, and...I can't stop thinking about their exchange.

He had stared at Olivia, bowed before her, and started to weep. She responded by looking down on him with a complicated expression.

...I can't help but feel this treaty is going to be a huge problem.

At any rate, now that Saphiria has shown they're on our side, Goldenia is expressing pro-Laville sentiments. It must put Buffer in a tough position.

The Federal States and the Republic are in an alliance, which means they have an extremely close relationship. The two share imports and exports and prosper from this exchange. In terms of the balance of power, the Federal States of Saphiria has the upper hand. Goldenia considers one of the resources specially grown in Saphiria to be an indispensable import. On the other hand, although Saphiria has a high demand for many of Goldenia's resources, the same can't be said of other nations.

If the Republic of Goldenia joins the alliance against Laville, and the Federal States of Saphiria decides to break it off with them, I can't imagine the losses they'll suffer.

Naturally, opinion within Goldenia itself is sure to be divided. There must be some who thought they could join the alliance, destroy Laville and Saphiria, take the land for themselves, and flourish more than ever before. I'm sure of it.

Risk and return. Buffer must have weighed the scales and decided he would

observe the situation as our supporter.

Then there's the savage king of the Asylas Federation...but he's being oddly quiet. He's neither joining the alliance nor siding with Laville. I have no clue what he's thinking. Maybe he's just being a pain in the ass.

...Anyway, you might say that this situation is all because of Olivia. Now that she's helping run Laville, Saphiria and Goldenia are on our side. We don't know what's going on with Asylas, so only Megatholium, the Vyheim Empire, and some small rabble nations have joined the alliance against us. They don't have the power to fight us, so they'll probably stay back for now. Still...I imagined they would eventually break their silence.

The die has been cast. Before we left for Megatholium, the continent had indeed been working toward coming together as one. But now, pro-and anti-Laville factions are glaring at one another, and the Asylas Federation is watching from a bird's-eye view as it waits for a chance to strike.

...This continent we call home is entering an era of chaos.

Well, I will put down my pen for now.

On the fourteenth day in a month marking summer's end.

Signed,

Ard Meteor



"...Phew."

It was late into the night. I sighed with fatigue as the lamp nearby flickered dimly.

"Just finish up this last sentence, and...yeah, that should do it."

I had picked up a habit of journaling recently. This was just another effect the holy nation had left on me.

I sat at the desk in my room, wrote out my thoughts with a quill pen...and finished that day's entry.

"Nghh..." I let out a quiet groan and stretched my limbs. Then, I looked over at

the large bed in the center of the room.

“Zzzz... Arrrd...”

“Zzzz... Zzzz... Heh. Hee-hee-hee... Zzzz...”

“ZZZZZZ... *Cough! Hack...!* That’s so you, Big Sis Lydie! The Demon Lord pitched that ball to you, and you cut it right in half...! ZZZZ!”

Three lovely ladies were asleep on the bed. I was happy they all seemed to be having pleasant dreams.

“...I’ve rarely been sleeping at the same time as them.”

That was all thanks to my new obsession. Journaling could be a fascinating activity. It felt great to have a sentence finally come to you after careful deliberation. Ginny usually wrote novels and short stories for fun, and I could see why she was so into it. I’d completely fallen for the charm of writing, becoming completely engrossed with honing my new craft.

As a result...I hadn’t been getting much sleep lately.

“*Yawn...* This is bad... When I get hooked on something, I end up going all out...”

I wanted to be careful not to make a total ass of myself like I did in my old life.

“Well, I guess I better hit the hay, too.”

I extinguished the lamp illuminating my desk, and the room was pitch-black. I walked across the large room to the bed and quietly went to lie down.

Irenea’s sleeping face was right next to me. Her dreams still seemed peaceful.

...The incident with Lizer had changed the world. You could say this created small shifts in our own lives, too. Unsurprisingly, there were people in the Academy who refused to welcome Irenea, and more than a few relationships had soured...but life was good.

I understood this was a gift from my big sister. I couldn’t ever thank Olivia enough.

However...even Olivia couldn’t keep it going forever. There was no doubt that, at some point, this would all fall apart.

When that happened...I would take responsibility. This was all because of me, so when that time came, there would be no hesitating.

I was saved during the fight with Lizer. Everyone had rescued me. So next time, it was my turn to protect them. And for that, I...would be willing to throw away my life as a typical nobody.

...The life of Ard Meteor was coming to an end.

I closed my eyes and let my consciousness drift away.

AFTERWORD

I don't think I'm meeting anyone new here.

Hi! It's been a few months. It's Myojin Katou.

We're already well into summer. Speaking of which, what comes to mind when you think of summer? I think of chilled ramen...which I guess is in my author bio, so I'll try to find something else.

Six hours later...

...Sorry. I couldn't think of any good memories about summer. If I was a fictional protagonist, I'm sure I would have no shortage of stories—going to the pool with a hot girl or strolling through a summer festival. But I'm a real-life NPC, so I have none of those experiences. Damn.

Summer is hell. It's blazing hot, my electric bill is through the roof, and I worry if I have heatstroke. I wish it could be winter all year-round.

...Let's switch topics.

About the main story. I was a little nervous about this one—mostly because I introduced characters from a short story.

The new girls at the beginning of this volume are main characters in a short story published by *Dragon Magazine*. I was nervous that anyone who hasn't read the side story would be totally thrown for a loop. I feel like I did an okay job at integrating them... What did you think?

...Well, it's time to express my gratitude.

To my editor, thank you for giving me such cutting advice. I wouldn't have gotten this far without you. I'm looking forward to continuing to work with you.

To my illustrator, Sao Mizuno. I am forever indebted to you. Thank you so much for your beautiful illustrations.

And last, thank you to all the readers holding this book in their hands.

Well, I pray we will meet again in the next volume. Good-bye for now.

Myojin Katou

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